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THE WILD WIDOW

By

GERTIE De S. WENTWORTH-JAMES

New York
EMPIRE BOOK COMPANY
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THE WILD WIDOW

CHAPTER I

One fresh April afternoon two women entered Humpeldeye's in search of tea.

One of them was clothed in costly attire and looked shabby; the other was dressed in one-and-eleven-three materials and looked smart—quite smart.

"Th—there doesn't appear to be a table—let's go on to Daridges'," murmured the unsmart woman vaguely and helplessly.

But her companion paid no heed to this suggestion. She just stepped forward, trailed her one-and-eleven-three draperies over the thick spongy carpet and looked every occupant of every table full in the face.

Midway up the second room she halted in front of two persons of the type inoffensive and sex feminine.

They had evidently come up from the suburbs and intended to absorb every possibility which a two-shilling tea might hold.

But Katherine Orlitson intended differently.

She glanced deferentially at their half-empty cups, still more deferentially at their warm faces, and then turned to her companion,

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"These ladies will have finished in a minute, I can see," she said, "so let's wait here. We're not unduly blocking the gangway—oh, please, *please* don't hurry—and it's always worth while—oh, have you *really* finished? Are you *quite* sure? I hope we didn't hurry you?—thanks so much!"

The flushed ladies—who had been reckoning that, with the addition of hot water, the small teapot could be relied upon to yield at least four more cups of tea—murmured that they had finished long ago, and after casting one yearning glance at the remaining cakes, which might have been demolished to the last crumb without extra charge, scuttled nervously away.

Mrs. Orlitson sat down sinuously and stuck out her definite chin.

"You're a bewildering person, Katherine, with a marvellous faculty for getting what you want," ejaculated the expensively clothed friend (Lady Chesham by name—"Mrs. Brown," "Robinson," or "Price" by nature).

Katherine pushed back her long veil and laughed just as loudly as it gave her pleasure to laugh—for although her simple brown frock was of a cheap variety she never lowered her tones to a Cathedral whisper when chatting in public restaurants.

"Getting what I want!" she repeated in a curiously deep, full voice which, before her marriage, had been marvellously successful in penetrating to the very back rows of provincial galleries. "If you only knew, Evelyn, how I've *never* got what I want, and how every

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minute I'm farther away from getting what I want, and how soon I—I—oh, yes, tea—tea for two! Cakes?—I suppose so—one mustn't come here without eating cakes, must one?—and dry biscuits—*very* strong tea for me, please—and—er—what was I saying?"

"You were saying how you never got what you want." Lady Chesham smiled.

"Neither do I, except in small silly things which don't matter. I only ran up to town to-day to see if I could find some job—absolutely a *job*, Evelyn—that would get me out of my present slough! But no one seems keen on me and my marked abilities!"

"My dear, I'm very sorry to hear this. I didn't know anything—you see, I've seen so little of you since your marriage," replied Lady Chesham limply.

"Of course you haven't. I began to keep out of everybody's way directly my few wedding gowns wore out and directly I found I'd married unsatisfactorily!"

"My *dear!*" There was the British-matron note in Evelyn Chesham's voice—that note which is in itself a sermon, preaching loyalty to the man who is taken for better for worse, muteness concerning his faults, fearless upholding of his hidden virtues, and a good many other uncomfortable, unpractiseable theories.

"Well, I *have* married unsatisfactorily, Evelyn, so do bring those nice eyebrows down to their normal level, and stop thinking you ought to feel shocked. Roger is nice—distinctly nice—his anecdotes are most amusing, his theories most just and sound, his affection quite pretty, and his gentleness delightful. I am fond of

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him—extremely fond—but all the same he has made me what I am—a *failure!*"

"A failure—do put some hot water in the pot, Katherine; the tea will be undrinkable! How can you be a failure wh—when at twenty-eight you don't show the faintest indication of increasing hips or expanding waist? That figure alone ought to make you a happy woman! A failure!"

"Yes, Eve, I am a failure because—I read this sentiment somewhere—every woman who marries unsatisfactorily is a failure. She may make a big niche for herself in drama, literature, music; may be a social success; may look well and dress well; but if the legally-attached man doesn't arouse the financial envy of other women, she is a failure! Roger, who won't earn money and won't shave, couldn't arouse the envy of other women! Why, he is so indolent and unstrenuous that he has even grown a beard and whiskers!"

Lady Chesham looked bewildered, and before the sentence was half completed had ceased attempting to follow its bye-wanderings. But the main facts she understood.

Katherine Orlitson—formerly Katherine Benstead, a parentless, red-haired pupil teacher who had run away from Madame Grenean's select academy in order to join a provincial touring company—was hard up, dissatisfied with her husband—and perhaps here was a faint chance she might want to borrow money!

Lady Chesham's purse-strings suddenly tied themselves up in ten Gordian knots.

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"Is your husband good-looking? I've never seen him, you know," she remarked by way of dragging the conversation away from financial quicksands.

"Of course you haven't. No one's ever seen Roger. I didn't have the opportunity of displaying him when his clothes were new, and now his coats have become reduced in number and his trousers are fringed at the hem, I keep him out of sight. Yes, he's not bad looking in a pard-like sort of way. Nice hands, and——" Here Mrs. Orlitson paused to shoot an innocent glance of noncomprehension at some seatless new-comer who was furtively eyeing the table that had been occupied for more than a considerable period. She then turned an insolent thin shoulder in his direction and left the sentence unfinished.

"You're not living in town now?" was Lady Chesham's next query. She hoped they weren't.

"Heavens! No! Not in any town! We're retrenching in a three-roomed furnished cottage built on a marsh in the wilds of a *gott-verlassen* hole called Seedlingditch. We have to fetch letters from the Post Office if we want to get them more than once a day, live on tinned salmon, and find amusement in wondering what a human being would be like if he or she ever chanced to be dropped down by a balloon. We pay seven-and-sixpence a week for these luxuries and bathe in a rain tank in the back yard. I clean the mansion and cook, while Roger lies in bed, reads back numbers, and smokes. We've been there a week, and haven't yet seen any living creature except an idiot pedlar, ten rats, two frogs, a deaf postman, and the tadpoles in the rain

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tank. Select and not overcrowded! Now shall we go?"

Lady Chesham assented that they would go after decisively producing *one* florin to show that no other would be forthcoming from her Gordian-knotted purse.

"Don't be silly. *I'll* pay. I suggested this place, though I never knew twelve months would have developed it into a carpeted A B C! In Paris it manages to keep all right, but—*ugh!* what can you expect when tubes go direct from Hammersmith to Down Street?"

And Lady Chesham's demur was so well bred as to be almost soundless.

If dear—hard up—Katherine insisted upon paying, she must do so, that's all!

"What time does your train start? You are going back to-night, aren't you?" she enquired as they stepped out into the London season's sunshine, which is so unkind to one-and-eleven-three materials.

"Oh, yes. I'm going back to the moated mud heap! The train starts at six forty-five."

"You've got over an hour and a half yet. Come back to the hotel with me—we've got a residential suite at the St. Monarch's, you know—and let's go on talking." Lady Chesham reckoned that with tea just concluded and the train starting at quarter to seven this suggestion involved no hospitable liability as regards meals.

"I will—gladly. I like talking to *anyone* who isn't a rat, frog, tadpole, idiot pedlar, deaf postman, or pipe-

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smoking husband—and to have a clever, congenial, understanding companion is a joy!" Katherine knew quite well that Evelyn Chesham didn't possess any of these three last-named attributes, but titled friends are always likely to come in usefully—hence the wisdom of three lies.

Twenty minutes later they reached a luxurious hotel private drawing-room, whose hotelishness was not disturbed by a single intimate photograph, pet shabby cushion, or much-read favourite book, and for some time the conversation turned on the doings of long-ago school-day friends.

"And how is that rubber-faced girl—Mary Laurence—whose manners were haughty on account of a prospective fortune to be secured on the prospective death of an actual grandfather?"

"Oh, I saw her a few days ago. The grandfather is dead and has left the fortune to a hospital!"

"Poor Mary!" There was true sympathy in Katherine's thrilling voice. "What a horrible sell! Hasn't she got anything?"

"The details of a roulette system, and £3000 to work it with. But she's opened a milliner's in Bond Street with the £3000——"

"And the roulette system?"

"Oh, she doesn't bother about that. She showed it to me—it is absurdly simple, and if one didn't know such things always failed, really seems the sort of trick to make a fortune. The grandfather had been thirty years inventing it and testing it, but died before he

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found nerve to work it with his own money. Mary, very wisely, leaves it alone. She turns out quite unusual toques!"

Katherine nodded. She wasn't thinking of toques.

"*It really seems the sort of trick to make a fortune.*"

A fortune! If she could only raise some money, go to Mont——

"Evelyn, do show me the system. I'm awfully keen on those—er—clever sort of things!" she said lazily.

Lady Chesham felt flattered. She liked showing things, and instantly produced a pencil and several sheets of thick notepaper. It was the hotel notepaper provided with inclusive charges.

"This is it," she said, quickly marking out thirty-six squares to represent a roulette table. "It seems ridiculously simple, but Mary says it's a matter of knowing how many spins to miss, and how many to catch—or something like that. The grandfather's theory was that thirty-six ruled the whole spirit of the game, and that all reckoning was to be done in halves or quarters of that number. For instance, to catch or miss the right turns, he said, it was necessary to—oh, I really forget, but Mary left the written directions somewhere here. I'll show them to you, and you may be able to understand better than by my feeble demonstrations."

Here Lady Chesham threw aside her irregular squares, and produced from the writing-table drawer a small roll of papers.

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"This is the full explanation. Mary told me to let anyone see it who—she wasn't complimentary—might be fool enough to try it, and give her a percentage of winnings."

Katherine took the papers in her thin, very white hands, and for ten minutes examined them in silence.

When she looked up a faint flush was visible, stealing through the coating of *poudre véloutée* which covered her thin face, while a tint of dark grey gave temporary depths to her restless light eyes.

"May I take these away with me, Evelyn?" she asked, restrained excitement causing a strange slurring indistinctness of her words. "I'm quite honest—you know that—poor people usually are. I'll return them to-morrow, and if ever I can raise any coin to try the system, Mary shall have her percentage. Of course it isn't a certain system—we all know such a thing doesn't exist—but we played a lot of roulette at Monte when we were on our honeymoon, and also bought a little wheel for twenty-one shillings, so I know the board by heart; and this seems to me a skilful and scientific way of *securing the probability* of good luck. If worked in big sums, a substantial fortune might be made in ten spins and with ten maximum stakes. M-may I take the papers?"

"Take them by all means, but return them soon," replied Lady Chesham.

"I will—thank you."

During the rest of the interview Katherine Orlitson had very little to say that was worth hearing, and at

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six-forty-five she caught the fast train back to Seedlingditch—that "moated mud heap" where social brilliance found no scope, and where real retrenchment was a possible thing.

But Mrs. Orlitson disliked retrenchment—she didn't wish to continue it.

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CHAPTER II

"*Whirr-r-r-r, wh-wh-whick-wh-wh-CLICK!*"

The big iron pill—the orthodox marble had been lost, so a pill served—fell into No. 16—the fourth number of the *milieu douzaine*—and for the hundredth time Katherine Orlitson had proved her ability to satisfactorily miss losing spins by following the law-of-average scheme worked out by Mary Laurence's dead grandfather.

Not more than twenty-one hours had passed since Katherine kissed Lady Chesham's most convenient cheek and left the St. Monarch's Hotel, but already—during a great part of the night and most of the morning—she had made a comfortable competence in uncooked haricot beans! The supply of counters and shells had very soon given out.

There seemed no doubt that to anyone with several hundreds and a clear intelligence at his—or her—disposal, *the strong probability* of making a fortune of sorts was secure.

Katherine tilted back the hard wooden chair on which she was seated and stretched.

The action was not ladylike, but natural, seeing she had been bending over the small guinea roulette wheel for a great many successive hours.

Mrs. Orlitson remained inert for some moments fol-

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lowing the stretch, then, after looking round the very small, very squalid parlour, and noting that neither was the table cleared nor were the dinner things washed up, resolutely put Midas, Crœsus, Mr. Rockefeller, and Mr. Carnegie out of her mind to obey the calls of domestic necessity.

The roulette wheel and iron pill were pushed into a wooden cupboard to share the seclusion enjoyed by half a jar of marmalade, a paper packet of cheese, three empty and one quarter full whisky bottles, seven contentless "Goldchunk" tobacco tins, and a selection of sample cases and boxes and tubes.

One of the sample cases rolled out, and Mrs. Orlitson gave it a savage kick, because Mr. Orlitson's method of keeping himself supplied with expensive soaps, liqueur brandy, embrocations, chocolate, liver tonics, rose-brilliantine, etc., etc., without the inconvenience of subsequent expenditure, grated upon a certain sense of honour which, unseen and unsuspected, lurked within her breast.

In fact she had at times even gone so far as to secretly purchase small quantities of the satisfactory samples, in order to soothe her conscience-by-marriage.

Mrs. Orlitson's sense of honour may have been distorted and of a somewhat jesuitical variety, but it was nevertheless an existent quality.

After the roulette wheel had been consigned to the limbo of the cupboard, Katherine proceeded to clear the table, making a great many more journeys to and from the little back scullery than was at all necessary.

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She cleared the table like an undomesticated woman and washed up after the manner of one loathing her task.

Not one dish was scraped or denuded of its lingering contents before being plunged into a tin bowl of hot water, with the result that chipped crockery, cracked glass, and dented plate were all cleansed (?) in an unsavoury *potage* of tinned lobster leavings, pickle leavings, and heavy jam tart leavings.

The method was not satisfactory, but in due course Katherine's washing up was accomplished and the pillow-slip—which had been pressed into service when all kitchen cloths were wet—hung on the back of a chair to dry.

Then there was the parlour to be tidied—in fact resweeping was necessary, owing to Mr. Orlitson's easy methods of shaking out his tobacco pouch over the floor and gesticulating with crumbly pieces of bread—the scuttle to be replenished, the scullery to be scrubbed, and the kettle filled for tea.

In a pitiful, finicking way Katherine went about these uninspiring tasks, holding up her skirts at the newest hip angle and tripping out to the coal cellar with all the daintiness of a successful *demimondaine* crossing Piccadilly Circus.

At last everything was finished and——

"Damn!"

There is no use denying the word, or even putting a consonant followed by a dash, for nothing but the unclipped expletive left Mrs. Orlitson's lips as she dropped

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a shovelful of soft coal over the newly scrubbed scullery floor.

She looked at the coal, she repeated the remark, then sat down on a small inverted packing case and burst into tears.

"I can't go on at this!" she cried insensibly, speaking aloud as though the chipped plates resting on the dresser formed an appreciative gallery audience. "I wasn't meant for it—some women aren't, and I'm one of them! I must get money—I must—I *must*—not a little money, but *lots!*—and *lots!* I'm a failure—a failure on the stage—a failure in marriage, and a failure in c-c-c-carrying coal!"

The outburst was brief owing to Mrs. Orlitson's sense of humour—which was evidenced by the shape of her inartistic nose.

She picked up the shovel, laughed hilariously, recleaned the scullery, then, after mixing and drinking a gentlemanly whisky and soda, went upstairs to the small bedroom on the first and last floor.

Roger was out as testified by his indoor once-grey flannel trousers and once-blue blazer lying on the floor beside a pair of list slippers, and near to a grimy soft collar and greasy green tie.

Mrs. Orlitson cleared this customary *débris* and "dressed" to go out—for even at Seedlingditch, where only the idiot pedlar or deaf postman were likely to be encountered, she never allowed her striking henna-tinted hair to be less *ondulé* than was strictly becoming, or her very beautiful waist to relax a single inch.

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But to be candid, Katherine Orlitson's waist never wished to relax, and even though she might wear cheap corsets with every bone and side steel broken, the beautiful waist always retained that natural frontal dip which saves every physical situation.

So long as a woman's waist is willing to go down in the front she may still retain hopes of being able to do something she oughtn't to do, and of getting blackballed from her club.

To-day Mrs. Orlitson put on a short grey tweed skirt, one of those convenient shirt-blouses that are mercifully concealing to bad figures and humbly subservient to good ones, a short coat, a straw hat which set exactly as it ought to set on the top of a great red plait, and a narrow, shiny scarlet belt.

Her long, thin throat was swathed and well arranged, and her pointed hips were satisfactory in their fleshless protuberance.

The flip of an old powder-puff about her nose and chin, one curl pulled out by a hat pin, a touch of crimson lip salve, and Mrs. Roger Orlitson was ready for her walk.

She stepped out of the mouldy little cottage into buoyant late winter air made warm by young spring sunshine.

Should she go to meet Roger? No, probably he would return before she was ready to come home, and quite possibly he had gone the other way—besides, what could they have to say to each other out of doors that they hadn't said indoors during the dreary, intermin-

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able week which had passed since they rented the Seedlingditch cottage in order to retrench.

Katherine looked at the road leading to the village, decided she wouldn't take it, and proceeded to cross a stile with all the fuss of a woman meant to live in towns.

But the air was effervescent, the fields were green—if unpicturesquely level—the sky was blue with the pale turquoise of very young, almost unborn spring—and life could hold many possibilities for a thin woman of twenty-eight.

Yes, many possibilities, almost limitless ones, if only the soul-stultifying ban of enforced retrenchment could be removed.

Katherine walked over the emerald grass and tried to pretend she was rich—a mental game which had been called very much into requisition since the retrenching stay at Seedlingditch began.

The game was played without much variation—usually an oblong envelope containing a solicitor's announcement that some forgotten relative or acquaintance had died leaving Katherine Orlitson—*née* Benstead, daughter of the late Percy and Melita Benstead—a fortune varying from many, to *very* many, thousands.

To-day the thousands were only moderate in quantity, because directly they came into the legatee's possession she would, by means of old Jonathan Laurence's roulette scheme, be able to increase them to quite an elastic extent.

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Katherine's light grey eyes grew darker, as they always did when she played the mental-fortune game with any degree of enthusiasm.

She would first settle all details of her inheritance, then, after buying a selection of well-cut gowns and well-planned hats, would take a first-class through ticket to Nice.

Yes, she would go to Monte, she would take one regular seat at one regular table, and—and——

"*Ah!-h-h-h!*"

The exclamation came like a hot breath between her closed, white, uneven teeth, while the thin hands, which carried two odd gloves and a six-penny cane, tightened their grip.

It would be so wonderful if somehow this could happen. If, after years of struggle and longing, culminating in an unsuccessful marriage with a likeable man who never cultivated his earning capacity, she could spend money *lavishly*.

Not an occasional jaunt, not an infrequent extravagance, but just a systematic having all those things which the *monde de luxe*, seen in its most modest aspects, enjoys.

Many rings on her fingers, ruby pendants for red gowns, a turquoise and diamond set of ornaments for blue gowns, and a liberal selection of diamonds—hats of every sort and shape—frocks for most occasions, and quickly discarded—shoes to match, and not to match—an electric brougham—a trio or quartette of silent servants—a gravely furnished flat in a right locality—

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nothing extensive—nothing excessive, but just affluence enough to make existence a gloriously valuable asset.

A fierce primitive excitement surged through Katherine's whole body, and her limbs quivered with actual physical exaltation, for she had played the game of mental make-believe so well that the many rings seemed positively to be weighting her fingers and cutting into the flesh as she tightened her grip upon the sixpenny stick.

But yet this was not avarice, not the cruel hungry passion of a miser—merely the luxurious woman's natural longing for luxury.

Katherine once more breathed deeply through her clenched teeth, after which the gay mental picture began slowly to fade away, like the lingering departure of a rainbow when the sun wins an entire supremacy over shower.

The diamonds were gone, the electric brougham had glided away, the flat was dissolving, and instead—why a man's leg in a dark blue trouser and the curve of a brown-bearded cheek showing beneath a tilted-forward straw hat!

Katherine Orlitson jerked herself back to realities.

Roger had gone out in his blue suit and straw hat. Roger's cheek was brown and bearded, and even though Roger did spend most of the day in bed, it would not come at all amiss for him to lie down amidst short, sweet, cool, green grass and repair any havoc which the exhaustion of a two-mile walk might have wrought.

At first Katherine decided not to wake her husband,

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but then, actuated by a mild desire for human companionship and human converse—Roger was always companionable and conversational—made up her mind to spoil Roger's slumbrous serenity.

She walked a few steps forward, touched a large, gentlemanly hand—which was cold like flesh just plunged into iced water—jerked aside the straw hat, then uttered a restrained, yet vibrant, scream, unconsciously melodramatic in its *timbre*.

The gallery had always applauded that scream in days gone by.

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CHAPTER III

Dr. Morgan T. B. Sphait sat before his consulting-room fire drinking a cup of tea and reading the current issue of the *Seedlingditch Herald.*

He was a large, pink, splendid, handsome man, this doctor, who had the monopoly of every sick or semi-sick person living within a ten-mile radius of Seedlingditch, with a beautiful heartiness of voice and manner which effectually deceived guileless patients as to the excellent qualities of his disposition.

By way of advertisement he made it a rule to attend a few of the very poorest cottages without charge, and his blazing red motor might occasionally be seen waiting for hours at a stretch opposite some miserable hovel, inside which an utterly unneeded morsel of humanity was being brought forth to take part in the universal scheme of indirect slaughter and robbery which goes by the name of existence.

This did not often happen, and the uncharged patients were few and far between, but both advertisements were produced with sufficient frequency to cause Dr. Sphait to be regarded as "the poor man's friend," as well as a soundly clever practitioner.

Once or twice timid would-be usurpers, with feebly glowing small red lamps and second-hand bicycles, had made efforts at self-establishment; but even though with

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noble generosity Dr. Sphait sent them an intermittent patient or two—generally some of the non-paying brigade—they were forced to slink away leaving no traces behind except a few bottles which had never needed filling with medicine.

The big red man and the big red motor-car carried all before them, for though Seedlingditch was in itself a sparsely populated little town—or village—the motor and the telephone had made Dr. Sphait able to do serious harm to various placid practitioners residing at Cumley, Bridgebart, Munchwater, and other reachable localities.

It is true that one of the unsuccessful competitors, who had been forced to take down his red lamp before three months had elapsed, was once heard to assert that "*Dr. Morgan Sphait, his motor, and his reputation were merely subsisting on 'puff,' and that one day the bubble would burst.*"

But as no one quite knew what the "bubble" was supposed to contain, and were somewhat vague as to the exact meaning of the word "puff" when used in this application, Dr. Sphait's popularity remained unabated.

One excellent widow lady whose daughter suffered from varicose veins in the leg had been known to suggest that it would be "more—er—comfortable if Dr. Sphait were a married man," but when the varicose-veined daughter secured the affections of an earnest curate, the widow ceased lamenting on her medical adviser's celibacy.

And now no one in the least troubled because Morgan

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Sphait's house was managed by an elderly working housekeeper instead of a young idling wife.

He was so cheery, kind, sympathetic, and professionally sexless that the most sensitive spinster felt no tremors at calling him to her bedside.

"'E's one of them gentlemen as seem born married!" remarked the grocer's wife when he had brought her ninth into its inheritance of sugar and candles. And that summing-up defined the outward aspect of Dr. Morgan Sphait, M. D.

"Bagslowe, I should like another round of buttered toast," he was just remarking after summoning the excellent working housekeeper, when a loud peal at the patient's bell made him realise that the second buttered round must be deferred until some rural pulse had been felt, and a bottle filled with twelve doses of absolutely harmless tinted fluid.

Bagslowe hurried away to open the door—it was the thirteen-year-old page's afternoon off duty—and returned a moment later with a scared expression on her respectable face.

"Who is it, Bagslowe?" asked Dr. Sphait cheerily. He even kept up the cheeriness in the domestic seclusion of his own home.

"It's a lady, sir—a stranger—and she's carrying on awful, without seeming as if she was carrying on, like!"

"A lady—do you *mean* a lady?" Bagslowe had once been upper housemaid to a recognised county family, so could be relied upon for nice distinctions.

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"Oh, yes, sir—at least ladies as they are now, sir—nothing like Seedlingditch, sir."

"Aha!" Dr. Sphait pulled down an inch more cuff. "And is she——"

"Oh, pray, pray, don't keep me waiting—let me come in! let me come in!" cried a low, thrilling, frenzied voice from the hall.

Dr. Sphait opened the door, and as Bagslowe discreetly slipped away, the "lady" dashed into the room regardless of any good manners she may have ever had the excellent fortune to possess.

She wore a grey tweed skirt, a now crushed and soiled white shirt blouse, a shiny vermilion waistbelt, and a straw hat which was half falling off her head, while masses of beautiful red hair escaped from their moorings, and in many places burst through the confinement of a torn fringe-net.

"Good-day, and what may I——" began Dr. Sphait with his more refined cheeriness which was reserved for better-class patients, should any happen to stray that way.

But the "lady," allowing emotion to overstep good manners, interrupted.

"You must come with me at once—my husband—I believe—I am sure he is dead—*dead!*" she cried wildly, while her light grey eyes gazed unseeingly at her companion's splendid Norse-king-with-a-touch-of-John-Bull personality.

"My dear lady——"

"Our name is Orlitson. We took Spar Cottage, fur-

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nished, and came there a week ago. You must come with me—now—now!"

"But, Mrs. Orlitson, pray explain, no matter how briefly, the—er—circumstances——"

"My husband went out for a walk directly after dinner. I went out an hour later, and, crossing the fields, saw him lying down upon the grass. I touched him. I—I—knew—at—once——"

Here the slurred deep utterance ceased, and shuddering, Katherine Orlitson covered her face with two thin white hands.

"Perhaps you are quite mistaken in your grave conjectures, Mrs. Orlitson," answered Dr. Sphait, moderating his cheeriness to the level of a more hopeful reassurance as he stretched out one large finger and rang the bell. "A sudden and quite brief seizure will often mislead the—— Order the car instantly"—as Bagslowe appeared in answer to this summons—"and put brandy and smelling salts in the basket."

"Yes, sir."

"Er—yes, it is quite common——"

"No, there is no deception. I felt his hand. Ah, I shall never forget! Oh, let us go—*now*—it's no use waiting for the car. I ran all the way!"

"All the more reason, my dear lady, why you should not run all the way back, and as the car will be ready in three minutes we shall arrive in less than half the time," replied Dr. Sphait, speaking in those tones of cheap spurious firmness very much in vogue amongst medical advisers to the lower middle classes.

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Spurious firmness is one valuable professional asset and bluff cheeriness another, for both, in some vague manner, cause the patient to feel that he or she is possessed of a temperament. And the lower middle classes of to-day are beginning to faintly comprehend the social *cachet* which is conferred by a temperament.

The brisk sternness apparently proved of service in Mrs. Orlitson's case, for it became evident that she was making a giant effort to keep her emotions under control.

Both hands were tightly gripped round the sixpenny wooden stick, her pointed chin was thrust forward and her reddened lips compressed tightly together, while strained, staring, light grey eyes fixed themselves on a vacancy that seemed miles and miles away.

Every now and then a very faint moan escaped her lips, but it was only when a sudden sound of snorting and puffing announced the car's arrival that she dashed to her feet and uttered one cry of relief.

"Thank Heaven! Now we shall know—we shall *know!*" she muttered, rushing out of the room and out of the house while Dr. Sphait followed, buttoning his huge overcoat over a huge chest and a stethoscope.

"Where is the field?" he asked, still keeping up the soothing sternness.

Katherine explained. Dr. Sphait nodded to the chauffeur, and the great red car darted forward.

"Are you and your husband living alone at Spar Cottage, Mrs. Orlitson?"

"Yes, quite alone."

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"You haven't any servant or charwoman about?"

"No. We came here to retrench. I have been doing everything—only we two in the cottage. And now—now I shall be al—al——"

"Now this won't do, Mrs. Orlitson. Please remember, for the sake of everybody concerned, it is necessary for you to keep your feelings under control, and—— Ah, this is the field, isn't it? We must get out and walk across."

Katherine nodded dumbly, and once more strained forward her chin and fixed her light wild eyes on space.

Mechanically she permitted Dr. Sphait to assist her to alight, then in silence the small thin woman and the heavy stout man trod the emerald grass, but newly released from its thraldom of frost—till suddenly Katherine halted and pointed to the right.

"O—ver th—ere!" she whispered.

Dr. Sphait nodded and administered one encouraging pat on her shoulder.

"You sit down and wait here, Mrs. Orlitson. I'll come and tell you directly I know."

Katherine slid down on the moist grass—right down—and buried her face on her arms.

She didn't want to see, know, or hear anything till she was forced to see, know, and hear—*everything!*

The moments passed and the cold wind blew above her head. She could picture what was happening—the collar being loosened—the waistcoat unbuttoned—the shirt pushed aside—and the stethoscope being gently dabbed down on place after place.

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And the eyelids. He would raise the eyelids—she had read that this was part of the ghastly procedure—and learn the secrets revealed beneath. He would——

Once again a large hand was laid upon her shoulder—not a pat of encouragement this time.

Katherine's red head was lifted.

"Yes—well?—tell me."

"I grieve to say, Mrs.—er——"

"Orlitson. I told you our name was Orlitson."

"I grieve to say, Mrs.—er—Orlitson, that your sad conjecture was correct. Your husband is dead!"

Katherine rose stiffly to her feet and swayed slightly.

"Dead! Roger *dead!*—he—ah!-h-h-h!"

The cry was long and shrill—the natural, unrestrained outcome of a shock and terror that were uncontrollable.

Dr. Sphait gripped her by the wrist.

"Mrs. Orlitson, you must not give way like this. You must compose yourself," he said authoritatively.

But as he spoke he noticed—it was a grotesque moment to notice such things—the unusual softness of her skin, the straight slimness of her swathed throat, the perfection of her waist, and the profusion of her red hair.

The widow's features were imperfect, but she was an attractive-looking woman.

"I will try—I will try," she moaned. "But—but—it is—I *can't* realise—it seems incredible—he started out for his walk so perfectly well and strong, complaining of nothing but a slight headache——"

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"A slight headache! Ah! That was a symptom, so far as can be seen by a brief examination, your husband has died from a sudden rush of blood to the head, immediately followed by syncope. Has he recently suffered from any shock?"

"Nothing—nothing. We have been in financial difficulties, but he never allowed anything to prey on his mind and—oh, let me go back. I can't wait here. Let me go to the cottage and prepare for—for—*his home-coming.*" Dr. Sphait glanced down swiftly and keenly. This last remark savoured of the drama or a Methodist hymn.

"Yes, you go and we—my chauffeur and I—will——"

"Yes—yes. I *can't* stay. I *can't*——"

And without one look at the lifeless body which was flesh of her flesh and bone of her bone, Katherine Orlitson darted across the gay green grass.

Unencumbered by an ounce of superfluous flesh, or the pressure of corsets forced to enclose more than their circumference would admit, she ran with incredible swiftness, reaching the cottage before Dr. Sphait and his chauffeur had lifted their inert burden into the car.

The low wooden front door was open. She entered, and, after closing it, turned the lock.

A step was audible. Katherine dashed up the narrow, creaking stairs.

"*Go out at once—into the shed,*" she cried.

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CHAPTER IV

."ORLITSON.—On April 24th, at Spar Cottage, Seedlingditch (suddenly), Roger Orlitson, aged 30. Deeply mourned."

"Oh, Charles, how terrible!" cried Lady Chesham, who had just read this announcement.

"Whatsh terrible?" enquired Sir Charles, a tall, lean man who has secured his personality by means of a semi-inarticulate utterance combined with a perseveringly acquired vein of cynicism and his comfortable affluence, by means of his wife's banking account.

Lady Chesham handed him across the paper.

"Ur! A man must die some day. Thirty ishn't a bad age!"

"Poor Katherine!"

"Lucky Katherine, p'r'aps! Better ask her up to sthay, hadn't you? Expect she wantshs a feminine shoulder to cry on!"

Lady Chesham didn't answer quite at once. She would be very glad to have poor Katherine for a week, even though the St. Monarch's charges were high. But if poor Katherine was quite destitute, the week might stretch and——

"Inshured, washn't he?"

Lady Chesham jerked, and an expression of satisfaction instantly settled on her face.

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Of course she remembered Katherine had told her that when she and her husband were on their honeymoon an eccentric semi-millionaire—whom Roger had adriotly saved from falling down an elevator shaft—insisted on insuring the bridegroom's life for the useful sum of £2,000, paying the premium four years in advance.

Roger had ventured to point out that, by this generous arrangement, *he* would never gain any advantage from Mr. Van Bolorst's noble recognition of his slight service; whereat Mr. Van Bolorst had presented him with a two-guinea turquoise pin, and insisted on his decision that it was "the womenfolk who mattered."

Thus the hard-up Mrs. Orlitson would undoubtedly come into £2,000.

"Of course he was insured. I really had forgotten it. You have an excellent memory, Charles! Yes, I'll most undoubtedly ask the poor girl up here for a week directly the funeral is over," was Lady Chesham's reply to her husband's last remark.

Sir Charles' mouth moved sideways beneath the shelter of a couple of dozen hay-coloured hairs, while his wife instantly sat down in front of the writing-table and penned a suitable missive.

"My poor, dearest Katherine,—We have just seen the sad announcement. Do write and tell all particulars, dearie. My heart grieves for you. Now, directly the funeral is over, Charles and I *insist* that you come here

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and put in a week with us. Do tell me your plans, and let me know if I can help in any way.

"With deep sympathy,

"Ever your true friend,

"EVELYN CHESHAM."

"That'll do, won't it?" said the "true friend," handing the letter over to her husband.

"Yesh, thatsh's all right. Shouldn't you have stuck in a bit of scriptural consolation or something?"

"Oh, no, not for Katherine—she isn't that sort!"

Sir Charles chuckled. He never thought she was.

For over a week Lady Chesham's letter of sympathy received no reply, but on the tenth day after its departure a black-bordered envelope found its way to sitting-room No. 12 at the St. Monarch's Hotel.

"From poor Katherine at last!" she ejaculated.

"Ur!" responded Sir Charles. "Whatsh poor Katherine say?"

Lady Chesham tore open the heavily-bordered envelope and proceeded to read aloud its contents.

"My dearest Evelyn,—You must have thought terrible things of me for not having answered your dear womanly note before, but somehow I felt it was impossible to write till everything was over.

"Everything *is* over now, and I am absolutely alone in the world!

"As you saw by the paper, the death occurred on the 24th. I found the poor boy lying on the grass—

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dead! Fancy, Evelyn, dead just when snowdrops and crocuses are being born! Isn't it too sad, too pitiful?

"The doctor who attended pronounced death to be due to a sudden rush of blood to the head, followed by syncope. So absolutely sudden—so absolutely unexpected!—so absolutely awful!

"The funeral took place on the 27th at Seedlingditch churchyard, and I have given up this place: I couldn't stay in it now—even the thought of it terrifies me. And there was the inquest!

"Evelyn, I don't think I ever knew how much I loved my husband till now—when we are parted!

"As you know, I am not a sentimental woman, but there is a terrible, terrible ache at my heart.

"You are dear and sweet enough to ask me to come to you for a week.

"Nothing would do me so much good, and if you will have me, I'll arrive on Tuesday and remain till the following Tuesday, when—but I'll tell you all my plans when we meet.

"With all love,

"Your affectionate and grateful

"KATHERINE.

"P.S.—Poor darling Roger's life was insured for £2,000—you remember I told you about Mr. Van Bolorst in Cairo?—so financially I am all right at present."

"Er—ur—she doesh seem cut up, doeshn't she?"

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was Sir Charles' first mumble. "But the—ur—postscript's very satisfactory — postscripts often are!"

Lady Chesham paid no heed to whatever insistent satire might have been intended by this final observation, for the reason that, having bought her husband by a liberal retaining fee, there was no need for her to either smile at his jests or discuss his theories. Besides, she was busy wording a sixpenny wire telling dearest Katherine that she was expected for certain on Tuesday.

And for certain on Tuesday "dearest Katherine" appeared.

Lady Chesham had not been advised as to the exact time of her arrival, therefore, when at five o'clock a rigid waiter announced "Mrs. Orlitson," the hostess found herself unready with the verbal greetings of mingled tenderness and condolence which she had so carefully prepared.

However, there was no need to say anything, because when Katherine entered, it was with the air of a woman who has bravely battled down all public evidences of her grief and who doesn't mean to be a nuisance to other people.

And never had Mrs. Orlitson, as a wife, been so effective as now, when draped in the trappings of dull black bereavement.

The long gown fitted gloriously, and the perfection of her waist was unusually emphasised. Above her thin swathed throat was a white, clear-skinned face crowned

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by puffs of henna-tinted hair and a widow's bonnet—an almost indecently becoming widow's bonnet—her light grey eyes were half closed, as though to momentarily shut out memory's sad pictures, and her thin powdered chin was thrust upwards.

She glided forward and found the haven of Lady Chesham's arms.

Two kisses—one long breath that went into several syllables—a swift loosening of the swathing neck arrangements—and then Mrs. Orlitson had evidently got her emotions pluckily under control.

"Dearest Evelyn, you can't think how glad I am to come," she said, speaking in the low, slurring voice that was more thrillful than ever. "D-d-don't say anything kind to me—will you, dear? And don't let Sir Charles say anything kind. I h-have suffered—the shock has been paralysing—death, Evelyn, *death!* I have never seen it before! Ah!-h-h! Let me take up new threads—do not let us allude to anything. You understand? You are the one comprehending woman who can understand!"

"Of course I am, dearie," replied Lady Chesham, feeling gratified without knowing it. "You must let us pet you and take care of you—for a week. And now tea!"

The three final words showed tact, and Katherine evidenced her gratitude by a smile that was brave, as she sank into a very low chair—one of those chairs which seem specially built as a mockery to stout women who are obliged to wear elongated armour in the way of

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corsets—with the long black skirts swirling out from her knees like a fan.

Lady Chesham poured out the creamed tea, then led up to her companion's future plans.

"You—er—are staying in town for a time?" she enquired when Katherine had refused a hot scone. It was only tea she seemed to want—tea—tea!

"Only this week that I am your guest," she answered, leaning back and crossing her stylish feet.

"Oh!—er——?"

"When I leave here I go direct to Monte Carlo!"

"*Kath—er—ine—e—e—e!*"

Mrs. Orlitson laid down her empty cup, and thrusting out her chin, spoke a long sentence with de Staël-like volubility.

"Don't try to stop me—you mustn't try, because it will be absolutely useless, Evelyn. I *must* have something to distract my mind, and to play this scheme of Mary Laurence's grandfather will help. Yes, I know you'll tell me I shall lose every penny of this insurance money. So I shall, very likely—but it's to be either lost or—or quadrupled. I must be either poor or rich, Evelyn, and the tables will help me to manage either one or the other. If I'm poor, I suppose I shall be downright bad—and if I'm rich I mean to be downright good—so I must give myself a chance of downright goodness. My temperament is one which hates anything *middle*. The *middle* classes—circumstances *midway* between poverty and comfort—morals *midway* between virtue and vice—are abhorrent to me.

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I could starve or go to the bad much more gracefully than I could send back a joint because it was tenpence too much in price. This insurance money must make me either a beggar or a substantially rich woman, so don't say anything about the chances on the side of the bank, or the average of three suicides a day, or the cemetery among the olive groves of Caucade, will you? Be your own tactful understanding self and realise that a little sympathy is more likely to work human salvation than a whole catalogue of classified warnings! But I know you will—I *know* you will!"

And as Katherine knew she would, of course Evelyn Chesham felt she *must!*

"I—I do sympathise, dearie. I—er—oh, I do," she replied lamely. She mustn't warn, mustn't argue, so lame sincerity was the only course open.

"Thank you, dearest—how sweet you are! I knew you would! Now, will you add companionship to sincerity—will you come with me?"

"Oh, my dear, I couldn't now with social engagements getting quite thick—and besides, I don't think Charles would let me go without him."

In common with many other women who have purchased a husband—serial, and all other rights!—Evelyn Chesham made a pose of wifely obedience, while Charles had been taught to understand that a little public tyranny, gentlemanly jealousy, and controlling sternness were among the duties required of him—for such manifestations did much to erase the impression that Evelyn

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Leedbitter hadn't been able to get a husband without buying one.

"Oh, no, I daresay he wouldn't," replied Katherine good-naturedly accepting the situation instead of demanding that Sir Charles' authority should be displayed. "Well, if you won't come with me I go alone—alone, Evelyn, to make myself into a rich woman or——"

The missing word was dramatic. It would have appealed to that portion of the gallery which, by superior intelligence, had secured the first rows.

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CHAPTER V

KATHERINE ORLITSON was in Nice.

Half an hour ago she had arrived, and now she was unpacking her small trunk, which filled up half the space of a small bedroom in a small *pension*.

For, to the odorous horrors of a Riviera *pension*, Mrs. Orlitson had condemned herself.

Hotels were expensive, and until she could be very rich—of course there *were* other contingencies—she would continue to be very poor.

But Katherine heeded the discomfort of a palette bed and carpetless floor no more than she heeded the royal blue sea and those other everlasting glories belonging to the South, of which the subscribing novel-reader has grown so weary.

We all know the Riviera—fairly well if we've been there, and with vivid accuracy if we haven't.

We know all about those palms—how tired we are of those palms—we are fed up with magnolias, oleanders, and flower-scented air, we are quite fluent about "the finest band in the world," and as for the view from the Casino Terrace—well, of course we are much more familiar with that than with some secluded corners of our own local park!

During the journey Katherine had demolished an extraordinarily small quantity of food, with the result that now she knew an unwanted meal was desperately

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necessary—for if the brain is to be kept clear, strength must be maintained.

Occasionally she wondered how long that brain *would* hold out. She had gone through so much—she was going through so much more—and every now and then her head seemed to be spinning round with the velocity of a wheel, while for some seconds her mind remained a complete blank.

Then a violent jerk and a gulped-down whisky and soda would bring her back to the consciousness that she was a lonely young woman wearing widow's weeds, who had come for a jiu-jitsu fight with luck.

At least it wasn't luck—the *probability* of success was too strong for the word "luck" to be quite applicable.

Katherine flipped the old powder puff across her insistent nose and chin before descending to the *salle à manger*.

She saw a piece of much-thumbed roll, and a pun suggested itself—it was *sal à manger!*

Katherine laughed to herself and felt better. She tried to go on manufacturing more puns so that other thoughts should leave her brain at rest for a time and—

"Salt, madame?"

Katherine started and turned towards her neighbour, who was obviously English. That "madame" had indisputably betrayed his nationality.

"*Merci, monsieur, j'en ai ici!*"

The poor man looked disappointed. Then Katherine laughed, finished the joke, and became verbally British.

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She had swallowed a few mouthfuls of something unpleasant and her head had temporarily ceased its revolutions.

"I was feeling very continental just now—something in the *potage* brought it on, I suppose!" she said with that easy flippancy which comes naturally to some women, but must be instantly suppressed with others. The wrong woman flippant is a hideous tragedy.

The man smiled—the kind, tired smile of one who has failed consistently, but who always lives in hopes that someone else may succeed.

"You have come to play?" he enquired, putting the usual question.

"Yes, I've come to secure motors and Paquin gowns and villas and bank balances!"

"Ah—yes!"

"Please don't—ejaculations like that depress me! Have you come to play?"

The man nodded his unsleek head.

"Yes, I've come to see if ten pounds will get me enough to buy a fortune with! Fancy doing that at forty! Sad, isn't it?"

"But how do you mean *buy* a fortune? *Make* it, I suppose?"

"No, I mean *buy* it. 'Grey Rubbers'!"

"What are grey rubbers?" enquired Katherine before forcing a mouthful of some fresh unpleasantness down her throat.

"Shares—shares in the Andalusian Grey Rubber Company. Nobody knows much about them—they're

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one pound now—they'll be twenty pound in a month! Three thousand of those would mean £60,000. Sounds amusing, doesn't it? Nobody believes it, but I *know*. I'd stake my last pound on it, if I had a first!"

Katherine smiled automatically. She was thinking. Should she abandon play and buy "Grey Rubbers" with the £2,000 insurance money? Or would it not be better to make the £2,000 into £8,000 by means of Grandfather Laurence's system, then keep the original £2,000 and invest the £4,000 in "Grey Rubbers"—or, take the——

Katherine seized her glass of lemonwater and drank every drain of the unpalatable fluid. Her head was feeling too heavy again—as if the hair were separate, and was rushing round as the earth rushes round the sun!

But the cold lemonwater put the hair on again. She felt better.

Grey Rubbers! She would remember that, and she would remember the shabby English table neighbour who had given her the tip, if—if——

But of course even Grandfather Laurence's scheme was a matter of "if"!

Outside, the persistently written-up palms and sunshine and tideless Mediterranean were all the English tourist rightfully expects them to be; and inside, effective word-pictures were justified.

The heat, and hags, and millionaires; the *demimondaines* and gambling duchesses; the strident croupiers making real the "*Faites vos jeux, monsieur*," and "*Rien*

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ne va plus "—which is to be heard with such persistent jocularity at suburban roulette parties where the plunging players pronounce "*impasse*" in a manner entirely Croydon!—the "clutching claws," the Russian princesses, the dark jewelled lady who is quite as likely to be Otero as anybody else, the "eager, hungry faces" —they were all there.

But the red-haired widow, with the perfect waist, was just a faintly novel element.

And she was winning—always watching the wheel, waiting, reckoning, staking maximums, and *winning*.

Once or twice one of the six unprotected numbers would turn up—but not often. The widow seemed to have caught the spirit of the wheel. It was as if the click of the little balls—not an iron pill here!—warned and whispered to her alone.

Nothing disturbed her attention—which, as any experienced roulette player knows, is the greatest insurance against loss the gambler holds.

The magnetism of the wheel seemed to reach the woman, and the magnetism of the woman to reach the wheel.

Whispered comments concerning her good fortune, the scuffle between a *demi-mondaine* and a churchwarden's wife as to the possession of a heap of two-franc pieces, the clatter of over-turned coins and plaques falling on polished pitch pine floor—none of these for one second diverted her set, unswervable attention.

Sometimes it seemed that she herself *was* a wheel, that her head was spinning round with the ball, that she

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was part of the game—all forms of temporary insanity caused by desperate anxiety and desperate excitement.

But for all that, her bursting brain remained clear—almost painfully clear, like the outlines of the Esterels before a Southern storm—concerning the routine of Grandfather Laurence's scheme. It was more a scheme than an actual system.

Neuf! Rouge, impair et manque!" Right again—the widow had staked maximums on the second six numbers of the *première douzaine* and half maximums on the *milieu* and *dernière douzaine.*

The two half maximums lost, and the whole maximum received five times its stake—making the clear gain of 6,000 francs.

"*Vingt! noir, pair et passe!*" Again! The widow had only left unprotected numbers one to six.

"*Sept—rouge, impair et manque.*" Still one to six unprotected.

Katherine waited, missed a spin, then transferred her six uncovered numbers to 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18.

Whir-r-r-r—click!

"*Trois, rouge, impair et manque!*" Just in the nick of time she had changed! The spirit of the wheel hadn't failed to keep in touch with her intuitions.

Six more times "*la veuve rouge*"—as a Belgian rogue named her in whispers to a French courtesan—staked and won. Then, without another glance at the tables, she rose from her seat and glided out of the room.

She couldn't play any more—her nerve had given way—her head—her head—spinning—spinning——

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"Mrs. Orlitson!"

A voice reached her ears above the carrying strains of the Casino band.

It was the dinner-table neighbour—the "Grey Rubbers" man—he had an honest face.

"I've won, I've won," panted Katherine. "Come with me—count how much. I—I can't count!"

Esmond Pryce, besides looking an honest man, happened to be one.

"Come outside—come now," he answered.

Katherine followed. The Southern night was light—she never realised if it was moon or electricity—there was a secluded seat backed by the perpetual palms.

Crish—crish—crish—crish—continued the incessant rustle of 100 and 1,000 franc notes—it seemed to Katherine the noise would never cease—the *clink—clink—clink—clink*.

Eternal gold—no limit—no end.

At last the sounds ceased, and the honest dinner-table neighbour was cramming notes and coins into a black satin bag.

"How much have I won?"

"122,000 francs—nearly £5,000 in English money—and if you buy 'Grey Rubbers'——"

"I'll buy them—but I must get to England. I am going to be ill—to be very ill—but I mustn't be ill till I reach England. You'll help me? It shall be a liberal arrangement——" Her light grey eyes and voice were both wild and blurred.

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"Yes, I'll help you gladly," answered the honest dinner-table neighbour.

"Thank you," muttered '*la veuve rouge*.'

And they hurried forward through the South-scented night.

England—England—a country that should blaze with hope fulfilled!

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CHAPTER VI

SOMEWHERE in Sussex—it doesn't exactly matter where, except that it was near enough to the sea for a grey-blue line to be visible above the swelling breasts of the downs—there stood a chicken farm.

It wasn't a large chicken farm, although three hundred or so fowls of every age and breed seemed to give the place a sufficiently feathery aspect, but as vegetables were produced, and several absorbent pigs lodged in several odorous styles, Upper Deerbuck Farm could claim for itself a certain amount of agricultural importance.

One afternoon in late August, when the sun had reached its zenith and was preparing to decline in a haze of amber glory, the chickens became clamorous.

They knew their supper was late. Certain internal promptings told them that the great pail of yellow maize was nearly ten minutes behind time in making its appearance, and that the dry tin tanks ought to be filled with water.

"Clu-uck, clu-uck!" called the white Leghorns in protesting chorus, which was echoed by outraged Buff Orpingtons.

A red Sussex rooster, evidently considering that by

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right of sex he was entitled to display more than mild annoyance at this postponement of a meal, flew onto the roof of an outhouse and proclaimed his indignation with greedy masculine vehemence.

A bristling Houdan cockerel agreed with him. The solo became a duet—the chorus of hens interpolated, till——

"*Whew-w-w!*"

It was a whistle, clear, strong and musical—a whistle that could not proceed from the lips of a man—and as this, their supper gong, sounded, fowls and ducks rushed from every imaginable creek and crevice.

They flew down from trees, they abandoned unhatched progeny that would in a hour's time be sold at three halfpence apiece, they vacated a commodious dung heap, they scuttled through the long grasses of an adjoining meadow—one *passée* Minorca making use of her bandy legs and ragged wings at the same time.

Feathered life and friendly strife seemed everywhere, till it was finally concentrated on one spot—the exact spot where a tall girl stood holding a pail of maize.

"My apologies for this unpunctuality," she said, addressing the red Sussex rooster, whose beak had been already dipped ten consecutive times over the rim of the pail.

The bird accepted her apology—and some more maize—after which Honora Vayne plunged one long white hand into the amber seed and showered all the gobbling, greedy birds with a deluge of supper.

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Yes, Honora Vayne's hand was long and white—just exactly what a hand belonging to the proprietress of a Sussex chicken farm ought *not* to have been.

By right of literary precedent that hand should have been plump, a very little coarse and freckled—just as her hair, should have been gilded with "glints of the sun," her face pink and white—undoubtedly comparable to apple blossom—her eyes *en pièce* with the heavens, and her figure plump and bonny.

But in her personal appearance Honora Vayne was very much of a failure, so far as the picturesque unities of a chicken farm were observed.

Her hair was black, abundant, and drifted into straying Empire curls without any effort; her complexion wasn't by any means a triumph, except on the occasion of a rare blush—it was glorious then—her mouth was red, and parted as though unexpressed primeval longings were trembling on both lips; and her eyes—well they *were* wonderful, and utterly out of place on a Sussex chicken farm. Their colour? Hard to say. Every colour except brown or blue—very frequently they were black.

Honora Vayne was young, as youth is mercifully reckoned in these days of forty-year-old "boy politicians"—that is to say her twenty-third birthday wasn't passed—and without any effort or intention she always gave the impression of being a woman who waited.

Her eyes held the expression of one watching down a long white road, waiting for the sound of coming

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horses' hoofs—for the crush of an embrace—for the fulfilment of existence!

But, so far, she held no knowledge of what, or for whom, she was waiting.

That might come—*later*.

When the last grain of maize was apportioned, Honora called out in a voice that, like her appearance, was unexpected.

"Charlie, bring the water!"

Charlie—a ten-year-old youth belonging to the root-vegetable order of human beings—turned the corner of the white farmhouse staggering beneath the weight of a huge can.

Honora helped him carry the can, and between them they filled the dozen or so small tanks and tins placed in various positions which the fowls found most convenient.

Three hundred beaks touched the crystal coldness of the water, and as the red Sussex rooster threw back his head and uttered a gurgle of real relish, Honora laughed.

He reminded her of a priest who had once taken her in to dinner at a house where the Pommery was superb.

From the very first she had regarded that rooster as a man of the world. His management of the harem was essentially diplomatic.

When Charlie had dragged back the huge can Honora entered the long, low white house and fetched a basket. Egg-collecting time was here.

From nest to nest she went, gently lifting the white,

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cream, salmon, pink, and delicately-brown globes from beds of fragrant hay.

Most of the hens had done their duty to the ornithological Empire, but one small wooden box was empty.

Honora turned reproachfully to a plump Silver Wyandotte who, looking like a chinchilla muff, was pecking at a piece of potato peeling with an air of certain embarrassment.

"You've been lazy, haven't you, Ophelia? So little is expected of you—you might at least have done this for me. It isn't much to ask! Remember, you and I do not belong to the leisured classes—we each have our living to earn. Don't be lazy again, Ophelia!"

The chinchilla muff waddled off in a depressed manner. There was undoubted justice in her owner's reproach.

Honora entered another shed where a large glossy black Leghorn hen was sitting humped up in her nest, sullen with a desire for wrongly-seasoned motherhood, which she knew from harrowing daily experience would not be permitted.

Honora hesitated a second, then breathing a faint sigh of regret, slid one hand under the warm black breast of the fowl, who bristled all her feathers and uttered the usual cackling remonstrance.

The egg was there. And instead of being allowed to remain and to arouse a black Leghorn's most womanly instincts, it would be sold for three-halfpence!

Honora bent tenderly over the fowl, till black curls and black feathers almost intermingled.

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"I'm sorry, Juliet, very sorry," she murmured. "I would let you have your happiness, dear, only Tryke says *no good comes o' blackberry chicks.* Wait until the spring, Juliet—it won't be long—and then your sons and daughters shall grow up round you and stay with you until——"

Honora left the sentence unfinished. She couldn't tell Juliet that her future progeny should remain until trussing time arrived!—for the death of each bird caused positive physical anguish to this proprietress of Upper Deerbuck Chicken Farm.

Only born, hatched, fed, reared, fattened—to *die!*

Every morning, when at misty daybreak Tryke turned out into the sweet-smelling world to end the complete summer joy of half a dozen heedless, happy creatures, Honora buried her head beneath the bedclothes and prayed—prayed for the souls of her regular customers' dinners!

It had to be done, it must be done.

She had bought the farm in order to make a living. Tryke, Mary Tryke, and Charlie Tryke would probably resign their posts if the normal routine of things were not carried out; but yet not one preening, strutting, waddling Leghorn became a mute, inert feathered mass without Honora Vayne's pillow being wet with tears.

But this evening there was no sadness. Life was, for the time being, uninterrupted by the doom of man's appetite.

When Honora had been the round of the nests and collected one egg from the spout of a rain-pipe—this

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was Portia's invariable lying-in abode—another from the vegetable marrow beds, and others from the shelter of an old coal-scuttle, from a deserted beehive, from the exact centre of a bare, empty pigstye, and various similar spots which eccentrically-minded hens selected for the scenes of their domestic rites, she entered the house.

"Mary!"

A buxom woman appeared, took the eggs—which it was now her duty to sort and pack before Charlie went on his evening rounds of delivery—and then Honora turned into the parlour where tea was laid for one—tea, cream, giant plums, primose-tinted cake—a succulent, appetising meal—but always for *one!*

Honora threw herself on the shabby sofa covered in American cloth, and closed her eyes.

She was feeling almost dangerously lonely to-day—that sort of loneliness which engenders morbid thoughts and is morally unhealthy.

For one whole year she had been mistress of Upper Deerbuck Chicken Farm, during which time she hadn't exchanged five hundred words with anyone who wasn't a labourer, a thirsty cyclist, or a purveyor of dairy produce, and now suddenly—to-day—she felt it was impossible to continue without companionship.

She had thought her own thoughts so often till they seemed getting threadbare and senseless; she had read books, and books, and books, but perpetual reading without interchange of views and argument becomes mentally stultifying.

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Humanity may have a profound contempt for humanity, but the mutual need is there nevertheless.

Honora rose and suddenly became alert as she had been indolent a moment ago.

Where was the daily paper?—that daily paper with its marvellous advertisement pages which have set in train the fulfilment of a hundred thousand destinies.

Honora found it on the floor—where she had left it—and spread out its sheets on the end of the table where tea was not laid.

Quite possibly there might be some advertisement which she could answer—some individual *might* seek a temporary rural resting place?

Honora ran a long white finger—such an unsuitable finger for a Sussex Chicken Farmeress—down the columns, and halted when she came to the section headed, "Seaside and Country Board and Residence."

"A German gentlemen, wife, and seven children desire a quiet holiday retreat." No, Honora's desire for companionship wasn't unlimited. "A young married couple wish to spend September in a restful country home." No—not a young married couple absorbed with themselves, possibly their own happiness, possibly their own love! They would only increase Honora's loneliness! "A widow—young, recently recovered from severe illness—desires to spend the months of her retirement in a picturesque country farm. Genuine country, chickens, and peace essential. Sunsets. Pigs preferred. —Apply, XX, Box 1801, etc."

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Honora smiled, clapped her hands, and looked nineteen.

Nothing would be better if she could get the widow, and if the widow fitted in with her advertisement. There was such a touch of whimsicality and humour about the "peace, sunsets, and pigs."

Already Honora felt in sympathy with "XX," and the advertisement should be answered at once.

Honora uncapped her stylo pen and wrote:

"Upper Deerbuck Farm,
"Transley Road,
"Sussex.

"Dear Madam." (This commencement was uninspiringly orthodox, but it couldn't be helped.) "I am absolutely sure that I can fill every requirement stated in your advertisement. I am the owner of this Chicken Farm (chickens guaranteed, you see!) and should be glad to receive a paying guest. The country here is quite real, there are sunsets—every evening more or less—and six styes, containing ten perfectly genuine pigs. I should think £2 2s. or £3 3s. a week should be suitable in the way of terms.

"Trusting to receive a reply,
"Yours truly,
"Honora Vayne (Miss).

"P.S.—Our nearest station is Transley."

Of course the letter wasn't businesslike, but then neither was the advertisement, and Honora insensibly

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felt that a woman who could make a printed demand for "genuine country, sunsets, peace, and pigs" would appreciate an equally spontaneous reply.

Anyhow, what had been written should be sent, and by the second post to-morrow "XX" should learn all the attractions of Upper Deerbuck Farm.

Two days passed without reply, but on the morning of the third a telegraph boy on a scarlet bicycle wheeled along the rutted road leading to the house.

He dismounted and called out "Vayne" through the open door.

A tall young woman, dressed in blue zephyr, emerged from the parlour, took and opened the orange envelope.

"Any answer, miss?"

"No—no answer—go round to the side and ask for a glass of milk."

"Thank you, miss!"

"Arriving this afternoon, 3.50, Transley Station. Send cart to meet me—not fly. Appreciate assurances *re* sunsets and pigs. Terms £2 12s. 6d.—KATHERINE ORLITSON."

Such was the response to Honora's unconventional letter, and thus two strange women were to be drawn into each other's lives.

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CHAPTER VII

Honora had been immensely busy ever since the receipt of Katherine Orlitson's wire, but now everything was ready, and in half an hour the paying guest would arrive.

The long bedroom above the parlour had been prepared for Mrs. Orlitson, and there was a tiny sitting-room on the same floor which could be placed at her disposal—for though Honora had taken this step with a view to securing human companionship, she fully intended that this "young widow" should be able to revel in the tearful joys of solitude whenever she so desired.

As directed, Honora had sent a cart—the jolting, springless conveyance in which Tryke fetched loads of hay—to the station, and in appreciation of Mrs. Orlitson's evident desire for a completely rural scheme of existence, she had forbidden Tryke to change his earth-stained corduroy trousers and linen coat for a more "Sunday" attire.

The new arrival was to be met by a genuine son of the soil, was to sit on a wooden bench, and to be jolted home in the most rickety cart to be found within twenty miles of Transley.

Just as they were starting Honora had, by way of inspiration, uprooted a mangel-wurzel and thrown it

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carelessly in one corner of the cart. She felt somehow this would be a sympathetic touch!

When the last rattle of the departing cart had died away, Honora hurried up to her own bedroom and inspected herself in the large old-fashioned dressing-table glass.

She was wearing a rather washed-out blue zephyr frock made with full sleeves gathered into wristbands, a plain tucked skirt, and loose blouse bodice.

Should this be changed for more orthodox afternoon attire?—for the flowered silk up in the wardrobe which, though a year behind the fashions looked decorous and becoming?

Honora's hesitation was only momentary. She quickly realised that a woman who wanted genuine country, sunsets, and pigs, would deeply resent any attire more decorative than that she was now wearing. In fact a stain of crushed flowers or crushed grass decorating the skirt might be very advisable.

And should Mrs. Orlitson be received in the parlour, or would an effective *tableau*, composed of chickens, a yard dog, a pail of maize, and a cotton-frocked girl, form a satisfactory first impression?

Honora decided it would and hurried downstairs, out of the low, dark hall into the afternoon sunshine.

It was now a quarter-past four, and the train had got into Transley at 3.50, therefore Mrs. Orlitson was due to arrive any moment.

Honora listened.

Yes—the sound of heavy cartwheels.

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Honora dashed into the storing shed, filled a pail with wheat and maize, and whistled.

"*Whew-w-w!*"

In battalions they came, grateful that to-day their supper wasn't late.

The picture was complete—a low white cottage-house, red and thatched-roofed sheds, a girl in a rumpley cotton frock, three hundred fowls, and a pink and gold sky, hazy like youth's dreams; to the right, beds of buxom cabbages, of onions, unready marrows, huge pickling cabbages (reminding one of great purple roses for a giant's buttonhole); to the left, a meadow, tree-shaded in places—beyond, wheatfields—beyond those, green bosoms of the hills—and beyond, the steel-blue line of distant sea.

The cart jolted down the rutted entrance road, and Katherine Orlitson saw it all, while across a vista of fluttering feathers, Honora saw a black-gowned figure standing up in the cart, the glow of red hair, and the outline of a perfect waist silhouetted against the sky.

The cart stopped. For a second neither picture was disturbed, as though both women were anxious to continue the poignant first impression which each was making on the other, then——

"Cock-a-doodle-do-o-o-o-o-O!"

The red Sussex rooster had been the first to welcome Katherine Orlitson to Upper Deerbuck Farm.

"Really! Then cook-a-doodle-do-o-o-o-o-O!" cried Mrs. Orlitson. And from that instant she was at home with Honora Vayne.

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They both laughed—laughs of light-hearted, expectant amusement that were excellent to hear—and Katherine jumped to the ground without tearing a single frill of the black silk petticoat so lavishly displayed when she held up her faultlessly cut skirt. Tryke realised his wife's eyes were upon him, and looked obtrusively the other way.

"How lovely, how perfect, how purifying everything is here!" exclaimed Katherine with all a town woman's incurable gush—gush, however, which was infinitely more sincere than uncomprehending middle-class people might imagine. "I feel sort of purified and resurrected—the sensation began to steal over me as we jerked along in that divine cart with the beetroot or artichoke lying in the corner, but now it's complete. Miss Vayne—you are Miss Vayne, of *course?* I'm *so* glad!—Upper Deerbuck Farm is going to rejuvenate me and prevent me from ever feeling thirty!"

Honora listened with a sense of fascinated enjoyment.

For a year now she had only heard the slow, heavy speech of provincial rustics, and this London woman's rush of ready, silly, amusing, exaggerated, flippant words was refreshing and exhilarating as the dipsomaniac's first drink after being discharged as cured from an inebriate's home.

She knew now what had been weighing her down, oppressing her more and more each day—it was the need of flippancy and gay exaggeration, which Mrs. Orlitson's had already begun to fill.

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"I am so very glad to see you, and I'm glad you noticed the beetroot in the cart—it happened to be a mangel-wurzel, by-the-by, and I put it there on purpose —but I'm so glad you noticed it!" she said.

Katherine Orlitson stuck out her thin chin and bubbled with laughter.

This responsive reply—taking up her own tack, spoken in her own vein—was delightful.

"Of course I knew it was a mangel-wurzel, and those are hens, and the person with the fashionable headgear is a cock, and that's a—a—dog, and the square, white, waddling things are ducks! I know *all* about it, Miss Vayne, so don't laugh at any supposed cockney ignorance I may possess!"

Honora smiled delightfully and then suggested tea.

"Now, Mrs. Orlitson," she said with a touch of business in her voice that had been acquired by a year's bargaining with customers who were always ready to take advantage of "*'Er up at Deerbuck*," "I have arranged a private sitting-room for you so that you can have your meals——"

But with a shrill cry and dramatic gesture Katherine interrupted.

"Don't, *please*, don't. Won't you eat with your P. G.? *Please* do; my table habits are beautiful. I shan't annoy you in the least—for Heaven's sake don't banish me now. I absolutely feel and see we shall have such a lot to talk about to each other that it'll be a race who gets in most words!"

Honora flushed with pleasure, and it was one of those

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brief moments when her complexion was a bewildering success.

"It's so nice of you. I was afraid perhaps you'd want solitude," she murmured as they entered the cool, shady house.

"So I should if—if—well, if you'd been what I felt sure you couldn't be by your letter! But as it is—no solitude for me, my dear!" concluded Mrs. Orlitson with a freedom and ease that had been formerly acquired in Mr. L. Lewis Verschoyle's A Company.

The function of tea lasted half an hour, and by the time it was concluded Katherine Orlitson and Honora Vayne were intimates.

They partially understood each other, and were already mutually longing to exchange views on those various emotional subjects which form the themes of most absorbing feminine confidences—for a certain electric type of womanhood is as rapid in forming its friendship as commencing its *amours*.

And the electric woman is not one whit less enduring than she who fights shy of Christian names at the end of five years. Rapidity is her keynote, and rapidity very rarely leads astray, for her intuitions are so accurate and her views so definite that any permanent change of sentiment need never be expected.

"Now, I never sent any references, so you'd like to hear all about me, wouldn't you?" said Katherine when she had been conducted to her fresh-smelling, chintz-hung bedroom.

"I should be awfully interested to hear whatever you feel inclined to tell," answered Honora.

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"Then I'll tell my history straight off in tabloid form. My age is twenty-nine—next year it will be twenty-eight. I was born of quite pleasing parents—a red-haired Colonel, who married the youngest daughter of somebody who was cousin to a baronet. They were immensely poor, and before dying planted me as pupil teacher in a sort of soul-prison known as an academy for young ladies. At twenty I ran away to go on the stage. For five years I toured, then I ran away from that to marry an Englishman named Roger Orlitson, whom I had met abroad. We had a delightful roaming honeymoon lasting over three years, at the end of which time all our money was spent, and, as my poor husband never made a hobby of work or earning an income, we were forced to retrench. Lord! how I hate retrenching!" Here the thin shoulders shuddered beneath their black draperies of grief. "With us it meant Seedlingditch—the very final spot that could ever have been created!—A three-roomed cottage, absolute isolation, and me—Me—as maid-of-all-work washing dishes! It was terrible, my dear! But the sad release soon came. Before we had been at Seedlingditch a fortnight my husband died suddenly—and th—that ended the retrenchment!"

Honora looked at the speaker with a query in her eyes.

"Ah!—yes—the money! You're wondering why I'm not practically foodless and clotheless, aren't you? Well, I should have been, only long ago—when we were honeymooning at Cairo—an eccentric millionaire person of

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the h-less variety nearly fell down an elevator shaft. Roger—my husband—averted the ugly tragedy, and by way of reward the millionaire insured his (Roger's) life for me—for £2,000, and paid four years' premium in advance. Poor sort of game for Roger, wasn't it? But old Van Bolorst was a chivalrous person who persistently asserted that 'it was the womenfolk what mattered.' Therefore when last April th—the terrible thing happened, I was left with £2,000. If it hadn't been for that—*ugh!* Possibilities aren't pretty to think about!"

"But surely, Mrs. Orlitson, you won't just live on your capital till it's gone?" cried Honora, whose acquired practical common sense couldn't help asserting itself.

"I don't know what I shall do—yet. But I'll tell you what I *did*. I went to Monte Carlo—played a sort of little elusive, fascinating, unsound roulette system and added £5,000 to the £2,000, then travelled night and day to reach England in time to comfortably enjoy brain fever in my own native land. I was ill from April till—well, I'm still a wreck, and I want to stay here till next April—till my first year of mourning is over—if you'll have me. For I must get strong, splendidly strong to recommence life just in the way I've always wanted to live it! That £5,000, Miss Vayne, is going to do wonderful things—it gets more valuable every day—and one day soon—but I'll tell you all about that when it happens! That's my story given with the ill-bred candour and lack of concealment that used to so

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terribly annoy my poor husband. I can't help being candid—wish to goodness I could."

"Oh, *don't* wish that," replied Honora with sudden earnestness. "It's a luxury to be candid—to be *able* to be candid and—then you have no relations?" She broke off abruptly in a manner suggestive of sudden stoppering of an open bottle.

"Yes—somewhere I have a brother—a large brother who went abroad—when I was still at the school. We've corresponded very intermittently, and really I don't know anything about him except that he meant to make money. Perhaps he's done so by now—I don't know! I sent him a paper containing the notice of poor Roger's death, but never received any reply. I expect he imagined I should be hard up—it's wonderful what bad correspondents people become when they imagine you're going to be hard up!"

"In my opinion hardupness is a crime that should be concealed until the very last moment. The world will forgive anything but that, and it's best to keep on good terms with the world as long as possible," responded Honora, who was moving backward towards the door with a view to leaving the "P. G." in undisturbed possession of her own room.

"*You* don't know anything about hardupness, with you fat fowls and potatoes and dear cottage and obvious prosperity. I should think you couldn't *understand* anything except happiness!" exclaimed Mrs. Orlitson heedlessly and impulsively. But despite the impulsive

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heedlessness, her light grey eyes flashed one very penetrating glance in the direction of Honora's face.

The owner of three hundred fowls turned away and laughed—but not before one of those brilliant, beautiful flushes had been momentarily visible.

"Happiness isn't altogether an easy lesson to learn," was her enigmatical response. And the next moment Katherine Orlitson was alone.

She slipped off her black bodice and skirt to sit in the cool luxury of thin petticoats and expensive corsets, one white, thin shoulder sticking up petulantly above the confinement of an embroidered strap.

"*That* didn't draw," she muttered, rubbing her smooth white cheek against the smooth white shoulder. "But there *is* something to draw! I'd bet 'Grey Rubbers,' when they reach their maximum, that there's something to draw! Honora Vayne mayn't be much over twenty, and she may live amidst the innocence of fowls and cabbages, but she's got a story and a past, or else I'm not the resourceful person I imagine myself to be! I'm going to be pals with her—complete, absolute pals—but I'll draw that past! After all my candour, it's an affront for her to keep an untold story buttoned up her sleeve!"

And Mrs. Orlitson laughed. She was evidently amused at something.

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CHAPTER VIII

THREE weeks later Katherine Orlitson and Honora Vayne had enjoyed two quarrels and made them up again, and had also discussed men, love, and all tributary details of these two great main cementers of feminine intimacy.

Their friendship, affection, and unity were therefore complete.

"I'm going to walk into Transley for hairpins," announced Katherine one afternoon.

Honora looked up from a ledger and ceased reckoning by means of five fingers being prodded on to a soft bosom. She was trying to add up somewhat unsatisfactory columns of outlay and returns.

"I can't come," she answered.

"I never made the slightest suggestion that you should, my dear. I don't think I want you. I may be going to meet my fate in the shape of some Sussex Reuben with a taste for red-haired widows! Good-bye. I shall be back for tea unless the Sussex Reuben is too ardent, so do let's have egg plums!"

When Mrs. Orlitson's short black skirt—the more decorous and trailing garments of bereavement were abandoned—had swirled out of the room, Honora laid down a pen in order to devote a few moments' attention to her thoughts.

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Certainly Katherine couldn't have loved the dead husband whose insurance money had saved the situation!

He had died at the end of April—it was now the end of August.

Four months is a short time for resignation and brave cheerfulness to grow the pace which Mrs. Orlitson's had grown.

"If I had ever married a man I loved, and he had been dead only four months, I don't think I should be witty on the subject of 'Sussex Reubens'!" she murmured with a quick, amused smile.

But then, how could Honora know? How can a virgin ever understand the entirely revolutionised condition of a matron's heart?

The woman who has married a man and experienced the inartistic intimacies of wedded life is a different being to the girl who doesn't even know that shirts button over from left to right.

In one way the wife's outlook is more enlarged, in another more cramped—for after all, what is so glorious as ignorance and inexperience?

Not to know—not to have learnt—to see miles of untrodden ways stretching ahead—why, it leaves a woman queen of ecstatic possibilities with a limitless playground for her imagination.

For another half-hour Honora added up, then, when the sun intruded with too fierce insistency round the side of the dark green blind, she shut the ledger and went out of doors.

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"I'm only going into the woods, Mary, if Blenton should come about those packing-cases," she called out.

Mrs. Tryke responded in a voice that had been less cheery since the advent of the "P.G."—the soil-tiller's excellent wife felt morally smirched by even distant contact with the flippancies of a "shameless 'uzzy giggling all t' day when 'er poor 'usband 'ardly cold in 'is grave, so to speak!" Then Honora left the house, ascended a grassy, hay-strewn slope, and entered the cool shadows of thickly-grown woods.

It suddenly seemed that the outside sunlight was garish, and that only among these silent shades could rest and purity be found.

Honora trod reverently like one stepping the carpeted aisles of a cathedral—for familiarity with the woods never brought about heedless acceptance of their hush and silence.

To laugh, even in the woods, seemed unfitting, unless it might be the low laughter of a woman made glad by the kisses of her lover.

"*The—kisses—of—her—lover!*"

Honora sat down, then slid down full length on the fallen leaves.

Before Katherine came she used to think, in the solitary woman's unhealthy way, a great deal about love, but the perpetual ripple of Mrs. Orlitson's perpetual laughter had put those natural, morbid, beautiful thoughts in the background.

Katherine was always saying something spuriously

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clever, and Honora was always answering something spuriously clever back again, so that left very little time for romantic reflection.

But to-day she was alone, the woods were sympathetic in their mysterious hush, and love ran riot, absolutely riot, in her mind.

Honora's eyes closed—as is the way with temperamental women when their temperaments are in a particularly assertive mood—and her red lips moved as though they were responding to the pressure of a man's mouth.

To be kissed in the hush of the woods—how wonderful it would be!

How every nerve in her body could respond to the pressure of the Right Man's embrace! How she could lay her arms about the Right Man's neck, and cool her hot cheeks against the white smoothness of his collar! How she could let herself be drawn closer and closer, till the shadow of herself and the Right Man would be but one shadow!

For months Honora's heart had held vague love-longings, but to-day those vague longings suddenly became a definite pain.

It was pain that her lips were unkissed, pain that—that——

A sob sounded in her throat, and without opening her eyes she raised one hand to her lips and passionately kissed the soft white flesh.

"My darling! My darling!" she cried, making her voice deep like the voice of a man. It was such foolish,

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hysterical make-believe, but there was comfort in the pretence. "Honora, I love you, I——"

The words ceased, the kisses ceased. Honora was conscious of something, of some alien element which had——

She opened her extraordinarily beautiful eyes, and saw a *man*—a man who was watching her with a curiously analytical expression on his face!

Honora did nothing—there was nothing she could do—and the man was still looking.

Their eyes met. His were either grey or blue, and Honora realised that he was a large man, actually rather fair, while giving the impression of being dark.

His mouth was shaved clean, and in his definite chin was the hint of a cleft.

His skin was bronzed. His clothes were nondescript and dark blue. His hat was straw. His boots were tan. He carried a thick sixpenny stick.

For a moment that exchange of glances was expressionless, then, as gradually a smile of faintly quizzical amusement caused the flash of one gold-stopped tooth to be revealed, Honora fully comprehended what had happened.

She had been seen—caught—by a strange man of apparently her own class, when occupied with the extraordinary diversion of kissing her own hand and calling herself "*Darling!*"

Without any doubt he had heard, and without any doubt he had seen.

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What might he not do? What might he not say to her?

Honora didn't wait to test these possibilities, but dashing up from her indecorous, prostrate position turned to the left and ran, ran through the trees till at least the eighth of a mile must have separated her and the large man in the dark blue suit.

But even though they were far apart it seemed as if trees carried the echo of a low, amused laugh.

Honora did not sit down again. She changed the run to a walk, and continued to thread her way through the trees.

Who was this man? Probably a golfer, who had strolled over from Transley, where the links were famous—to explore the outlying country.

Heaven be praised! They would never be likely to meet again. Honora felt that if she were ever called upon to face the large man in the dark blue suit there would be no possibility of her surviving the ordeal.

And his eyes were so insolent, yet—— Honora flushed in the shadow of the woods, for her mind had once more inconsequently reverted to thoughts of the Right Man whose collar she had longed to kiss.

This stranger, this big person wouldn't—so far as outward personality was concerned—be at all impossible in the rôle of Right Man.

He was so large and strong that the crush of his embrace might inflict a suggestion of pain—and love without pain is like lamb without mint sauce.

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The lamb might be mutton, and the love might be friendship.

Still Honora hurried on until beneath the shade of a hillock she suddenly came upon a man and a girl who were embracing with that curious disregard of possible observation peculiar to the lower middle classes.

The man's arms—both of them—were around the girl's waist; the girl's arms—both of them—were around the man's neck; her ill-cut skirt was drawn to one side, showing a liberal expanse of ill-cut leg, and their mouths were glued together in a kiss that was—in their case—an indecency.

But in other circumstances—a shady, fairy-haunted wood full of silence—and with other people—a different man and a different woman—such a kiss might have been regarded as a purely passionate poem—and this was what Honora realised as she turned and retraced her steps.

Her face was hot, her limbs felt hot, her whole body felt hot with that peculiar glow which is the direct result of a temperament.

That man and that girl! How close together they were! How close—how close!

Honora moistened her own red lips, which were definitely parted now, and hurried back.

There must be no more dalliance, as there were the eggs to be collected, and Katherine would be waiting for tea.

In less than half an hour she reached the little shady

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rutted road which Katherine Orlitson had designated "Our carriage drive," and as she approached, a crowd of hungry feathered things strutted forward to welcome her—at least to welcome the probable approach of a meal!

"Be patient, be patient!" cried Honora, addressing the unquellable red rooster. "Humanity's perpetual lesson in patience and fowls——"

But the homily was left unfinished, because at that instant Katherine Orlitson appeared at the open door, and then ran forward with the small-stepped run of town women.

Her red hair was very slightly disordered, and on her white angular cheeks was a faint flush.

"I'm so excited, so immensely excited!" she cried; "and I expect you to be the same! I can show you I'm genuine now. I believe you always have a sort of vague doubts about me, even though I'm so beautifully candid while you keep most uninspiringly close and secretive. Come along. Confound your silly, lagging little feet!"

Down the rutted road, through her own parlour Honora was rushed.

She felt out of breath—bewildered—blinded by the shadows.

"Now, I told you I had a brother, didn't I?" Katherine rattled on, slurring her words and speaking with more dramatic throatiness than usual. "I said he was a large brother, and a brother who had gone abroad! Well, he's come home! He received my news-

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paper with the account of poor Roger's death; he took a steamer, reached England, went to Seedling-ditch, got my present address from Dr. Sphait, and now he's come after me to Upper Deerbuck Farm! Bernard, Bernard—come in! Miss Vayne doesn't allow strangers to stand outside the window without special permission." A large shadow darkened the French window. "Come in—Honora, Miss Vayne, this is 'Berr'—my large brother, Bernard Benstead! Please excuse him for not being more like me!"

The shadow became a substance—a man was bowing a conventional bow—it was the man who had *seen*, *heard*, and smiled in the wood!

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CHAPTER IX

HONORA'S composure appeared complete. She returned the bow—distantly—but she felt that her cheeks were white with shame. And the thudding of her heart was agony.

"Isn't it fun, Honora, his turning up like this? It amuses me immensely—and it pleases me!" cried Katherine.

The large man smiled, and once more Honora saw the flash of a gold-filled tooth.

"He *is* big, isn't he?" Mrs. Orlitson rattled on. "Rather sinful-looking in a sandy sort of way, but not at all bad. You'll be quite a harmless sort of 'P.G.', won't you, Berr?"

"'P.G.'? What degree is signified by 'P.G.,' my dear Katherine?" enquired Bernard Benstead, speaking at last in a voice which slightly slurred, and rumbled like that of his sister's.

"Not 'Pious Grandfather' or even—er—er—'Pneumatic Gargoyle,' but 'Paying Guest,' you side-y person. Oh, yes, I know that pretended ignorance, which is nothing but sort of side like mouldy judges put on! Yes, you'll be Miss Vayne's 'P.G.'—you'll have him, won't you, Honora?"

"Since you see fit to consult me upon the matter, I'm afraid I must decline to—to let any more rooms," replied Honora coldly.

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Katherine gazed with absolute astonishment shining from her light grey eyes.

"Ho—no—ra! What is the matter? Why are you freezing me into an unfortunate Neapolitan—No, British—ice? What have I done?"

"Nothing, dear, nothing, only I—I don't see my way to receive any more visitors. I am—sorry!" And with a stately inclination of her dark head, Honora left the room.

Katherine turned to her brother.

"I'm petrified, positively petrified!" She exclaimed. "Honora's a sweet, dear, delightful thing, Berr! I adore her—she's made me under twenty again. I've never liked a woman *really* before. I *love* her—even though I'm sure she's got a past. I can't imagine what's the matter!"

"I think I can tell you," replied Bernard easily. "On my way here I met this emotional young lady in the wood, and seeing a good-looking girl—she's exceptionally good-looking in her own way, isn't she?—stretched out in the pose of a *déclassée* wood nymph. I permitted myself the impertinence of a stare and a smile—two smiles—possibly it may have been three smiles. I *was* very impertinent—I'm extremely sorry!"

"How tiresome of you, Berr—but of course it was natural. Nothing could have been more natural, and I'm sure if I'd posed *à la dryade* and a young man had passed *without* staring and smiling, I should have considered it an affront. But Honora is different. In

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some things she's so self-contained and dignified. She'd probably sacrifice her soul, virtue, and lots of other useful things for the sake of a man who took her fancy, but she'd resent a smile and a stare like mad."

"I understand. Lots of girls are like that—in books—aren't they? Confounded nuisance! However, do what you can, Kit, to put matters right. I want to stay here—the place is ripping—most conducive to moral reformation. Say—yes, say I'm near-sighted to the verge of blindness—*mind you achieve that lie for me!* Say I've got a way of staring without seeing anything. Say I—I—thought she was a child, and grinned paternally—say it well, insistently, pathetically, convincingly."

Mrs. Orlitson nodded her red head.

"No need to coach me, dear boy! Was there ever a Benstead who lied without being pathetic and convincing? You wait here. I'll come back when I've either failed or succeeded!"

When Katherine reached Honora's bedroom she knocked timidly at the door.

A pause—then——

"Come in."

Mrs. Orlitson made a splendid R. U. E. entrance with both thin arms outstretched and a cooing cry upon her lips. A Southport gallery audience had once nearly encored this entrance.

"Honora darling, Berr's just told me what he believes is the matter!" Honora's cheeks flamed. So, besides laughing at her folly, he had also betrayed it!

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—*betrayed to another woman!* "He says he saw somebody in the woods, but is so awfully near-sighted—poor old dear, he's had three operations already—sort of intermittent cataract—can see perfectly well one hour and is more than three parts blind the next!—yes, so awfully near-sighted that he thought it was some child, and thinking it was a kid he naturally smiled out of sheer good-nature. Berr's *awfully* good-natured and simple-minded—without remotely guessing that he was staring at—he *does* have to stare and peer so, poor boy!—at an awfully pretty woman! He begs me to put it right for him—he wants to stay awfully. I want him to. Honora, darling, pal, *do*, do let my large, inoffending brother come as a 'P. G.!"

The flames had left Honora's face.

So he really hadn't seen that supremely nonsensical impulse—he didn't know that she had kissed her own hand just because there wasn't anyone else to kiss it—and quite likely he hadn't heard either. Now Honora recalled her own voice, she felt sure it hadn't been raised when addressing herself as "*My darling.*" In fact she had imitated a man's gruff, non-penetrating tones!

"You *will* let poor Berr be a 'P.G.', won't you, Honora, darling?"

"Now that you've explained, Katherine, I—I think it'll be all right for Mr. Benstead to stay—if he doesn't find the other room too small!"

Mrs. Orlitson clapped her hands rapturously, then squeezed Honora's waist.

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"You angel! You seraph! And, Ora, dear, you'd better charge Berr £3 3s. a week."

For the first time Honora Vayne winced at financial details. Ever since buying the Upper Deerbuck Chicken Farm it had been a perpetual round of taking money in exchange for goods, and even Katherine's weekly bill hadn't proved disturbing.

But now, all of a sudden and for absolutely no reason, Honora shrank from discussing the practical aspect of the situation.

"Not on any account such a large sum as that," she said decisively. "I'd—I'd rather we let that slide—your own arrangement with me is so liberal th—that it would be a pleasure for your brother to stay——"

Two thin fingers were snapped just under Honora's nose.

"Not much!" retorted Mrs. Orlitson. "I believe Berr's come back quite well off—his stick's so cheap and he's got a gun metal watch—that looks like it, doesn't it?—but we'll settle that later. All I care about is that Berr may stay!"

"Yes—he—may—stay!" answered Honora softly. And there was a catch in her breath—she had just remembered about the Right Man—how he might possibly——

Yes, Bernard Benstead might stay.

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CHAPTER X

"Good Lord! I believe they're going to fall in love!"

Mrs. Orlitson made this remark to herself as she looked from behind the curtains of her bedroom window at her brother and Honora, who were standing in the seed-strewn yard below.

Honora was wearing a white dress—Katherine noted that her attire had become more effective and less insistently rustic during the last ten days—and on her cheeks was that flush which transformed her into a vividly beautiful woman—while Bernard kept his eyes fixed on her face.

"It would be nice. I should like Honora for a sister-in-law. But I'll have to get that past out of her first. Not that a past matters—of course—but I want to know. Perhaps there's nothing—but it's funny she won't be candid like I am about myself!" And Mrs. Orlitson laughed—she often laughed without the least reason.

Meanwhile Bernard was asking a great many questions about the farm. He had asked most of them before, but that was no reason why they shouldn't be asked again.

"Can't be very profitable to kill a hen that lays six or seven eggs a week, is it?" he enquired, following Honora in the direction of the styes, where a lady

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pig, who shortly expected to be the happy mother of twelve, was awaiting her customary afternoon tea of mangel-wurzel.

"Hens never *are* killed, unless it's old ones who're past laying and are sold as boiling fowls—but I—I never do that," answered Honora gravely.

"What, is it only the chaps——"

"Yes, only the roosters who are killed. In poultry-land, Mr. Benstead, and nowhere else, is femininity placed at its just valuation. The useless male thing dies, the profitable female, who justifies her existence, lives on in luxury!"

"I see. Not a single suffragist hen among all the crowd then, I suppose? But after all"—Bernard grew reflective and fixed his eyes on the grey sea-line—"the profitable female fowl wouldn't be quite so profitable if deprived of male co-operation, would she? I'm not quite sure that the theory doesn't hold all through!"

Honora laughed. The subject was scarcely one for exhaustive discussion, particularly with a man whose eyes were sometimes disconcerting and whose mouth very definitely emphasised the fact of his sex; so she made a pretence of dashing forward to separate a couple of bantams who occasionally evidenced antagonistic propensities.

But the pretence wasn't a success, for the regrettable reason that Honora slipped over a dropped apple paring and would have fallen if Bernard's large arm hadn't immediately come to the rescue.

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"You clumsy little girl!" Like a caress the words left his lips—and his arm was still about her shoulders.

Honora stood perfectly still for a moment, and knew that the pressure of his arm filled some unclassified gap in her emotions.

She would *like* him to draw her closer, closer still—to hold her—to touch her—to—but instead she broke away from a support that was almost an embrace!

"I am clumsy. I really must get a pair of Mrs. Tryke's 'Plimsolls.' I never knew why indiarubber soled shoes *are* called 'Plimsolls'—they defy apple parings or even banana skins, I think——"

Honora was talking rapidly—like Katherine talked—and with only a very vague notion of what she was saying. For some inexplicable reason she suddenly remembered that kissing couple who, ten days ago, had been sheltered behind a hillock, and the remembrance seemed to burn through her whole body.

Then she looked up, met Bernard Benstead's eyes, and saw the set of his mouth. Both were touched with passion, while the bronze of his face and throat had reddened.

"Bessie, Bessie!" Honora called boisterously to the big grey sow, whose little eyes were already beautiful with approaching motherhood—or meals—and, hurrying away from her companion, reached the stye.

Bessie ate the juicy root vegetables with relish and placed her fat back in a position convenient for being scratched.

Honora leant over and scratched vigorously with

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a stick—never before had Bessie felt so gratified—then, having forcibly dispersed her embarrassment, she looked round intending to pronounce some playful flippancy that would wipe out the memory of that half embrace.

But the flippancy was unneeded—Bernard had gone!

Honora breathed a deep breath, half of relief, half of disappointment.

She wanted him—she wanted him—she didn't want him! She didn't want him! She *mustn't* want him! She *daren't* want him—yet she did, she did, she did, she *did!*

"Bessie, I love him, I'm *in* love with him. I'm just waiting for the day when he will kiss me—in the woods! It must be in the woods—Bessie! Bessie!"

"Ur! Ur! Ur!" replied Bessie. That pink hog in the field was a very fine fellow. Perhaps she understood.

Having discharged this load of truths from her heart, Honora—who felt weak with emotional exhaustion—walked slowly back towards the house, against which leaned the scarlet bicycle of a telegraph boy.

A telegram! Who could it be from? Who could it be for?

A black-gowned figure had appeared at the doorway. She was flying, flying, with hands outstretched, as though one wing was an orange envelope, and another a pink slip of paper. Her red hair glowed fire-like in the sunshine—her white face was whiter than it

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had ever been before, and her light grey eyes were almost shut.

"It's happened! It's happened!" she cried, speaking low and fast. "After twenty-nine years I've got what I want. Oh, Honora, I wanted it so, and I've got it. 'Grey Rubbers,' my dear—Grey Rubbers bought at £1 a share and sold to-day at £40 a share —£5,000—worth I bought, Honora, and now—now——!"

The telegram fluttered to the ground, and Roger Orlitson's widow slipped down—fainting—across the bewildering message.

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CHAPTER XI

KATHERINE ORLITSON was lying across the bed.

Exactly twenty-four hours had passed since the receipt of her stockbroker's bewildering telegram, and she was still repeating the glorified news to herself.

In April she had been washing greasy dishes and filling battered coal-scuttles, debts had been pressing on every side—debts there seemed no hope of paying—and now—now she was a definitely wealthy woman!

The almost soundless "whir-r-r-r" of an electric brougham seemed to reach her ears. She could see her own red head rising out of costly furs as on silent wheels she was taken through the Park, or to pay calls on other women who were wealthy. She could see diamonds shooting out lights from her white thin throat and hair and arms; she could realise exquisite gowns, she could feel the throb of *vie de luxe* in every vein and in every pulse.

September! It was now the beginning of September, and still her strength was not fully restored after that illness which followed the nerve-racking time preceding it.

Sudden death, its attendant gruesome rites and formulæ, London, Monte Carlo, the strain of acute, unceasing mental concentration, the triump of success, had all considerably undermined her vital powers, so

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another seven or eight months of seclusion—which must pass before convention could allow any obvious lessening of widowed grief—spent here with Honora would be ideal.

And *après*——

Après, LIFE spelt with those huge capitals which only the rich have any right to use.

Life isn't life to a woman unless she is either rich or has never realised the possibilities of wealth.

But just to have tasted stolen, intermittent sips from the Cup of Pleasure, and then to spend all the rest of the time in watching other people quaff—O God, help the canker that grows in the heart!

Other people's carriages, other people's diamonds, other people's motors, other people's opera boxes simply form everlasting scourges which cause agony, ranging from chronic to acute, according to the time of the year.

From May to August, when London window-boxes are abloom and when accounts of the season's festivities fill nearly every column of nearly every paper, is the acute period. Then a ride on a motor 'bus or a walk down Picadilly is like a whip-lash to the woman with £300 a year!

But there would be no more whip-lashes or scourgings for Katherine Orlitson.

The gravely furnished Hyde Park flat—perhaps a *maisonette* with a billiard-room on the lower floor—would be possible; a few silent servants, a luxurious club, one or two things on wheels, gowns for every

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occasion, and—when she made a circle of desirable acquaintances through the introductions of Evelyn Chesham—occasions for every gown!

Ah! it would be *good!*

Katherine threw open the kimono wrapper she was wearing and stretched lazily. She was supposed to be going for a walk with Honora and Berr, but she didn't want to.

There were thoughts to be thought and a letter to be written.

That letter must be written to-day.

"Honora! Hon-or-a!"

She called shrilly, and a moment later the door opened to admit Honora, who was wearing a cream cambric gown with one blood-red dahlia stuck in the waistband.

"How more than pretty you look!" ejaculated Katherine ruminatingly. "You're nearly lovely sometimes, aren't you?"

"If you've called me here to be insulted by 'nearlys' I'll go!" replied Honora blithely. She felt happy to-day—extraordinarily, dangerously happy, and without any special reason.

"No, I called you to say that I can't go out—I feel slack—you and Berr will have to go by yourselves. You can, can't you?"

"Oh! yes—I suppose we can, but—but I thought you had arranged to come."

"Of course I arranged, *ma mie*, but you must learn that to a woman of my temperament the attraction of

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making arrangements lies in the joy of breaking them. You aren't a bit like that, are you?"

"No, I'm a humdrum, methodical person—one of those natural old maids hedged in by routine and caution." Honora spoke vehemently and with a certain underlying passion.

"Yes—you look like that!"

Katherine's intonation was humorous, but Honora did not smile.

"Ah! but it's true, Katherine, it's true. Sometimes I absolutely respect women who are brave enough to be entirely wicked. I never could. I might dally with sin, hedge around it, beckon it, but I should always be a coward! You, I know, are immensely brave. If you meant to do a thing you'd go right through with it."

"Yes—I—should—go—right—through with it!" repeated Katherine, for once speaking slowly and monotonously.

"It's splendid, but—I never could!"

A pause.

"Honora!"

"Yes?"

"Why are you here? What is your life? What is your love story?"

There was a pause while Honora tensely gripped at the rail of the bed and kept her lips tightly closed.

But when she answered her voice was calm and level.

"I am here so that the very small capital which came to me when I was twenty-one should be made to

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yield an income—that is to say, I bought this place in the way of an investment. My life has been more or less uneventful. My mother died when I was twelve, and then I travelled abroad with my father till he died in Scotland a little over two years ago—after which I came to England and negotiated for the farm. And my love-story—well, so far there has been no love-story in all my life. I have answered your questions truthfully, Katherine. I hope details are satisfactory."

Katherine stretched out her hand—there was real affection as well as dramatic action in the gesture.

"Don't be haughty, dearie," she cried. "I only asked out of loving interest—not inquisitiveness—and as I've told you all reprehensible details about myself, I thought a little friendly confidence in return was my due. And you must confess, Ora, there is something mildly mysterious about a young and not particularly bad-looking girl—ahem!—who lives alone, unwedded, unloved and unloving on a chicken farm! A peck from the beak of an affectionate rooster may be all right in its way, but it's *not* so satisfying as a lover's kiss. You seem at present a sort of unawakened person, like some mythology lady—a lover would make you divine!"

Honora relaxed her grip upon the bedrails and laughed.

"My divinity is a very far-away state of affairs, I'm afraid," she said lightly. "And now about the walk? You aren't coming then?"

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"No, I want to lie and think how I'll spend my money in London next spring. Run away and play, dear—play with my little brother Berr. I know a very good game that would just suit you two! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! It's called Honora, the game of lo——"

But Honora had left the room before Mrs. Orlitson's sentence was finished. She didn't hear what that good game was called.

In the hall she met Bernard, looking particularly large in white cloth trousers and a loose golfing coat. He had watched her as she descended the stairs, and was still gazing reflectively at her gracious figure.

"Katherine doesn't want to go out," announced Honora carelessly, "so we can postpone the walk until to-morrow."

"Of course we can. Come along. Are you ready?"

"I said we could postpone the walk——"

"Certainly, so we will. The walk which you, Katherine, and myself were going to take to-day can be postponed—but you and I will go for *another* one now on our own account. Come along!"

"Perhaps I don't intend to come along, Mr. Benstead."

"Perhaps not—come along!"

Honora hesitated. Why should she obey this man? Why should she let him take it for granted that——

"I'll wait for you outside; don't be long, because September sunlight isn't everlasting."

She felt impotent. He had strolled out of the low

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front door and was gently stroking the speckled feathers of a Grey Wyandotte with his sixpenny stick.

She would let him go on strolling by himself—she wouldn't think of going when she didn't intend to go.

But even as Honora insisted and argued to herself, the voice of Desire shouted aloud in her ear.

"Go with him, go with him!" cried Desire. "Life has not so many perfect hours that we can afford to miss those which are thrown in our way. You love him! Why not let him love you just for half a day—and now every one of his nerves is aquiver with love. Go to him, for he will leave you with memories which no past or no future can spoil. *Go!*"

And without waiting another second, Honora went.

Bernard slightly raised his hat as she approached—a half-grudging concession to convention that seemed out of place among haystacks and granaries—and fell in with her pace.

He made no remark upon the mute obedience to his will, but accepted her presence as his due. He had said "Come along," and of course she came. He was a man who wanted her to come—she was a woman who wanted to come.

"Where shall we go?" asked Honora, as they left the rutted "carriage drive."

"To the woods."

His answer was briefly decisive, and Honora's heart seemed to turn a species of somersault within her breast—for she knew what that would mean if they went alone together into the hush of the woods.

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"Wh—why not make for the sea to-day, and—get some ozone?" she suggested nervously.

"Because I want to be in the woods—*with you.*"

And five minutes later they passed into the gold-flecked gloom of the trees.

Honora felt she must say something—anything! This silence was indecent—as though she were waiting——

"How are your eyes? Have they been better since you came here?" she enquired.

"My eyes!" There was astonishment in the ejaculation.

"Yes, Katherine told me you were very near-sighted—intermittent cataract or something of the sort."

Bernard threw back his head and laughed. There was a flash of that gold-filled tooth.

"Of course she told you—I insisted upon her doing so—the lie was mine, not hers!"

"You—mean that you are not near-sighted—that you saw——?"

The vivid flush which made Honora beautiful left her face.

"Yes, I *saw!*"

"And—you—told—Katherine?"

"I did *not* tell Katherine." There was no doubting this statement: Bernard was speaking the truth now. "I merely told her I had seen you, admired you, stared and smiled; and then I instructed her as to how she

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was to make peace for me. It was an excusable lie, for I couldn't have left you."

Honora left the significance of these last words unheeded—she only knew that he had witnessed her folly, "sensual folly," perhaps, as a coarse-minded male creature might call that absurd outburst of feminine loneliness.

"Yes, I saw you kiss your pretty white hand—how white it is, Honora!—and at that very moment I wanted to put my lips where yours had been. I heard you call your little solitary self '*My darling*'—and, unknown to you, I repeated the words. I absolutely understand the romance and loneliness of your heart!"

"You—understand!"

Gravely his eyes met hers through the shadows.

"I absolutely understood, Honora!"

A passionate gratitude surged in Honora's heart. He had not told Katherine, and he understood!

Tears filled her eyes—she turned away.

"Honora!"

"Yes? I—I am so silly—I want to go home now—I shall have got over my silliness by the time you get back—but I feel so—so——"

"Honora!"

———

"Honora!"

———

"Honora—come back!"

She hesitated—then came back—right into his arms!

To-be-kissed-in-the-hush-of-the-woods!

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CHAPTER XII

But Bernard did not kiss her at once. He just held her close, looking deeply into her shamed eyes.

"You are lovely—you are lovely," he murmured, scarcely loud enough for her to hear.

Then gradually Honora felt his unswerving gaze was drawing the shame out of her eyes and out of her heart.

She looked at him now, steadily, as he looked at her—and the cool words seemed filled with fire.

Almost voluntarily she moved the fraction of an inch closer towards him—then came the kiss.

Unconsciously Honora closed her eyes—she was in dreamland, in dreamland, with a man's mouth upon her own.

"Look at me!"

For a second the kiss was broken by a command.

She must look at him!

Her eyes opened and found two grey-blue fireballs almost on a level with her own.

It was a kiss of the lips, and a kiss of the eyes, which must end—God! where could be the ending of such a kiss?

Surely down in Hades with Paolo and Francesca!—or might it be that Dante's Beatrice would in the end call it back to Heaven?

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When at last Bernard's lips left her own, Honora felt that all of her life must have been lived. There could be nothing else to experience, to realise, to feel.

"Sit down," whispered Bernard, almost as though he feared tree-birds might hear. Honora slid down upon the fallen leaves. For the time being now her will was only his will. "Lie down—right down—as I first saw you!"

She wanted to refuse, but it was not possible.

Her dark head fell backward—she was looking straight up at the green canopy through which filtered streaks of gold sunlight and flecks of blue sky.

Bernard knelt by her side and kissed the hand she had kissed.

"My darling! My darling!" he cried.

And Honora understood—he was making up to her for all the loneliness which had been!

She smiled up at him and innocence came back to her face, while his unmoral mouth grew almost good with tenderness.

"I love you so much, Honora—I love you, dear," he said gently, sinking down on the fallen leaves by her side and slipping one arm between her head and the ground.

"Do you? Perhaps you only think you do," she replied. The woman-coquette within her was waking now that passion was temporarily lulled to rest.

"How can it be possible that I don't know? How can it be possible that *you* don't know?"

"Why should I know?"

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"Have I not kissed you, and don't they say that a woman never remains in doubt as to the intensity of a man's feelings when once he has kissed her?"

Honora shook her head, and then rested one cheek against the sleeve of his coat, as though the contact was grateful.

"A kiss means nothing!" she answered sadly. "Isn't it supposed that a kiss on the brow means reverence, on the cheek tenderness, and on the lips—love? How could that be when practically every stolen kiss is laid upon the lips? Does the suburban partner—enlivened by cheap champagne—ever kiss the girl whom he takes into the conservatory anywhere except on the lips? Yet who would call that *love?* Do not men kiss women who—who—are not good—whom they may never see again—upon the lips? They can't love *them!*"

"Some men may—not those who possess any imagination. A decent white man may—may take a loose woman at the valuation which she places upon herself—this is, unfortunately, a decree of nature—but only an inartistic beast will kiss her."

Honora nodded. It was curious that she felt no sense of embarrassment in thus discussing quite "improper"—oh, that awful word!—subjects with Bernard Benstead.

He was absolutely a man, a lustful, sensual man, perhaps, but one entirely without a suggestion of coarseness in his moral make-up—and so long as even

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hidden coarseness is absent, there can be no "impropriety."

Men and women were not meant to skirt around natural subjects as though life-long penance could be incurred by the mention of some erring mother who might not happen to be a wife!

Half the world's immorality comes from its pretences and concealments, and generally those who conceal and pretend the most are the most inherently immoral.

"I have always thought—ever since I thought about such things at all—that love, *real love*, ought to have some rites exclusively its own," continued Honora. "If only kisses *could* be sacred to real love, how beautiful they would be!"

Bernard bent over and touched her mouth.

"Try to think they are—*for us!*" he murmured.

She looked up into his eyes—they were holding her own again.

"Tell me, darling, how can a woman know if a man loves her? How can I make you know that I love you intensely and absolutely?"

"I—I have always thought that only time proves love—in fact, it must be so."

"Why?"

"Marriage and unions which are not marriage evidence that. There is nothing but ardour, tenderness, happiness in the beginning, but after five years everything has gone! That was never love."

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"Then must people—must *we*—live to be doddering and silver-haired before love is an accepted fact? Must all youth's rapture be enjoyed with caution and suspicion, each one wondering of the other, '*Is this real or make-believe*'?"

"No, no, of course not that—but—but—— Oh! I don't know what I think! I've been all alone here so long that perhaps I've evolved all sorts of theories which are not sound; perhaps I don't understand——"

"Never mind theories, little girl; never mind about understanding anything—just put both arms around my neck and accept facts!"

She obeyed. It was happiness to put both arms round his neck, even as that common girl behind the hillock had put both arms round her lover's neck.

"Is it all right now? Do you believe that I love you?"

"Yes, Berr, I'll—I'll believe it!"

"Do you feel it?"

"Yes, I feel it!" She was cooling her cheek against his collar now, just as she had dreamed of cooling her cheek against the Right Man's collar!

"And do you love me?"

"I do love you—oh, yes!"

"Then there is only our wedding-day to settle!"

Honora's arms relaxed and fell to her sides. There was dazed horror in her eyes. She lifted her head from the loose flannel coat sleeve and half sat up.

"Don't—don't let's spoil the situation by—by flippancies," she said in a strained, unnatural voice.

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"What do you mean by flippancies, my little girl?" There was no acute surprise in Bernard's manner. It almost seemed as though he were half prepared for her reception of his definite proposal.

"I—I mean when two people are happy in an idyllic fl-flirtation it seems such a pity——"

Honora halted and Bernard made no attempt to finish the sentence for her. His face was quite expressionless—nearly polite.

Honora rose to her feet and brushed away the bruised dahlia petals which had stained her cream gown with crimson.

"We—I—must be getting home," she said, turning irresolutely away.

Bernard watched her walk a few steps; then he lunged forward and closed his arms about her. But this time the pressure was an imprisonment, not an embrace.

"I must understand this situation—understand it thoroughly," he said. "All the rites of a passionate betrothal have been performed by us. I have told you of my endless, passionate love; you have confessed to a return of that love—there have been wonderful kisses—kisses that would make a mark in the life of a professional *roué*—yet when I speak of our wedding-day, you tell me not to spoil the situation by flippancies, and you speak of an idyllic flirtation. What does this mean, Honora? That you refuse to become my wife?"

"Yes, that—is—what it means!"

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She spoke almost sullenly, and her face was momentarily bereft of its charms.

"I see. Yet you *do* love me?—you were not lying?"

"No, I was not lying."

Bernard smiled. So long as a woman loved, surrender of some sort was inevitable.

"And you will not marry me?"

"I have told you so!"—and she jerked petulantly at his restraining arm.

"Then how are things to be with us? Do you wish me to go away immediately?"

Agony entered her eyes, and he saw it with triumph at his semi-brutal man's heart.

"Oh, no!—there is no need for you to go—*yet*. Katherine wants you with her, and—and——"

"And you?"

"No—I don't want you to go!"

"Then what are we to be to each other?"

Honora looked at him imploringly. There was a hunted expression in her eyes, and appeal for mercy—but the man who loved was merciless.

"What are we to be to each other—acquaintances or lovers?"

"Let us just—drift!"

Bernard laughed—not quite a nice laugh.

"Women are very great on drifting," he replied, "but it doesn't quite suit a man who feels as I feel! Shall we be lovers?"

"Yes—lovers—*lovers!*" The word was vague, divine. She lingered over the saying of it. So much

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was meant by "lovers"—so much that is comfortable, satisfactory rapture for the naturally moral young woman, and torture for the naturally immoral young man.

"You understand what I mean by lovers, Honora?"

She looked up at him; then a hot flush spread over all her face.

"Remember," he went on, speaking rapidly and slurringly like Katherine spoke, "it is not my wish that there should be any unrecognised lie between us. I want you for my *wife*, but if you refuse, some other plan must be arranged. When a human man—a very human man, I may remark—and a human woman—a singularly *in*human woman!—love each other, and feel that separation is not pleasant to contemplate, nothing but what I suggest is possible. Honora, Honora, my darling, my lovely love, tell me—tell me——"

"*Oh!*" Just that one feminine moan of mental agony was wrung from her lips.

"I don't know what to do—I don't know what to do!" she cried wildly. "Give me time—let me think—let——"

"Honora-a-a! Berr-r-r-r!!"

It was Katherine's voice! Heaven be thanked, it was Katherine's voice!

Honora broke from her relentless imprisonment and ran through the trees.

Katherine—short-skirted, perfect-waisted, and very smart—was standing there with an imp's smile on her lip-salved mouth.

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"I got tired of thinking about my money, so came to see if you found Berr too utterly boring for words!" she said.

Then she looked at Honora's face—and grinned as she knelt down to tie a shoe lace that wasn't undone.

Less cute people mightn't have guessed, but Mrs. Orlitson *knew!*

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CHAPTER XIII

After a moment Bernard joined them, his whole demeanour showing a most reprehensible lack of embarrassment.

"Miss Vayne got terribly tired of me," he said with an easy smile. "So tired that she's been talking theories to me. I enjoyed it, but I always know that when a woman talks theories to a man it's because his personality don't inspire her to be more intimately friendly!"

Katherine glanced at Honora, who was examining the future possibilities of a blackberry bush; then she glanced at her brother and deliberately lowered her left lid over her left eye.

Bernard appreciated the wink and roared with laughter.

"You and I come of a damned artful stock, Kit," he remarked as Honora became more engrossed with a still more distant blackberry bush. "We could take in everybody else, but I'm dashed if we could take each other in. You always know what I'm up to, and I always know what you're up to!"

"Of course you do, *mon frère*," replied Katherine amusedly. "If your poor, scraggy, red-haired widowed sister tried to take you in she couldn't manage it for almond toffee! Regrettable, but true!" And with this Mrs. Orlitson turned her back before once more

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lowering that left lid over that left eye and stretching her lip-salved mouth into another brief grin.

These facial contortions were private, and solely performed for her own satisfaction.

A second later she turned round.

"Honora! Honora! Never mind the blackberries! They'll 'black' just as quickly if you leave them alone! Berr says you've been talking theories to him, so do come home and give the poor soul some supper by way of recompense!"

Honora hesitated one instant, as though she were gathering together some unseen forces of moral energy, then walked slowly towards them, her face bereft of its beautifying flush.

She looked nearly unattractive.

"So sorry I've been prosy," she said wearily, "but when I find a person who'll let me talk without spoiling my flow of eloquence by punctuating remarks, I'm afraid that person has a poor time of it. Mr. Benstead and I have been talking about love!"

Katherine looked at her with the true appreciating admiration which one woman dissembler feels for another woman dissembler, while Bernard flushed.

He had meant to adopt the audacity pose, but actually this young, tall dark girl whose lips had almost eagerly returned the pressure of his was calmly bringing his own tactics into his own camp.

Like a man, he resented her pluck.

"Yes," continued Honora calmly, as they ceased lagging and began to walk, "I was telling Mr. Ben-

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stead that, in my opinion, love isn't love till it has been proved by time. Nearly all young married couples think they are in love, and more than half the middle-aged ones know *they* aren't—but I won't inflict your unfortunate brother all over again. He has heard quite enough of my erotic theories—give us some of yours, Katherine."

"I don't think love plays any very important part in most schemes of existence," Mrs. Orlitson answered more seriously than it was her custom to speak. "At least, not with women who have been bothered by financial anxieties. There's nothing like tight money corners for cramping a large heart. How can a woman lie with romantic abandon on a man's breast when she's looking at his frayed collar and wondering where he'll get funds to buy new ones with? No, I *do* think a woman wants a man's companionship, his humour, the mental friction of his mind, his 'palliness,' but I don't think love is such a desperately necessary adjunct as people like to imagine!"

"Poor little Kit!" murmured Bernard compassionately, thrusting one big hand through his sister's arm, wondering as he did so what had been the details of Katherine's married life. "Was Roger a good sort?" he added inconsequently—but the instant that question was put he realised the *bétise* of asking a widow of four months' standing, and in the presence of a third person, if her husband had been a good sort.

But Katherine was beautifully unembarrassed.

"Yes, he was, really he was!" she answered affec-

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tionately. "Poor dear, he was very selfish, very lazy, and very extravagant, but the nicest, sweetest, gentlest, dearest thing possible to imagine. The idea of any husband different to Roger wouldn't fit with my views, although when we—when he was alive I used to nag and worry the poor boy from morning to night. I *was* a nagging woman, Berr!"

"*Were* you, Kit?—then perhaps the poor chap is better out of it, after all!" responded Bernard, in tones which betrayed deep, staunch sympathy for the unknown dead brother-in-law.

"Do you miss your husband very much?" broke in Honora. She had often wondered about this, and the present occasion seemed to make it permissible to ask.

Katherine turned towards her as though really pleased to discuss the subject.

"Your nice companionableness keeps me from missing anything or anybody to an acute degree," she answered; "but yet I must confess to wanting Roger much more than I ever imagined I should want him. When we were first parted—immediately after his death—I felt almost—it sounds a vile thing to say—sort of relieved! Things *had* been so difficult, you know, for us both! But now there are times when I'd give anything to find one of his uncorked brilliantine bottles—Roger never put in corks!—exuding over the floor, or to discover that he'd taken my new *crêpe de Chine* scarf to polish his tan boots with! He was a nice thing in his own way—poor dear!"

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"Good-looking chap, was he?" enquired Bernard, realising that it was not in the least tactless to question his sister on subjects appertaining to her widowhood. Until this moment he had felt all a large man's natural reticence in touching upon delicate emotional details, but now that the ice had become broken in this unexpected fashion, he was glad to ask what he wanted to know.

"Yes, not a bit bad without his beard. When we first met he was very hairy—had been so ever since hairiness became possible—then much later on I got him to shave it off. But eventually he got too lazy to shave, too hard-up to buy soap-sticks, and too well known in the sample world to secure any for the price of a penny stamp, so the beard came back again in full force—poor dear! But I don't like them, do you, Honora?"

"*I hate bearded men!*"

Honora's vehemence was so startling and so intense that both Bernard and Katherine glanced at her in astonishment.

"My dear old girl, anyone would think you'd been forced to kiss a beard, and hadn't liked it!" exclaimed Mrs. Orlitson.

Honora smiled automatically.

"I am very positive where my likes and dislikes are concerned—I'm sorry, for it's vulgar to be positive, and—oh! excuse me——" She broke off, as on turning down the rutted entrance road the figure of a burly labourer became visible. "There's Welter, from

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Transley, waiting to see me about the mushrooms. I must speak to him!" And without further explanation the girl who had been kissed in the hush of the woods darted off to discuss autumn possibilities for the storage of mushrooms.

"Bernard!"

"Kits?"

"The story of Honora Vayne's past turns on a beard!"

"Don't make a fool of yourself, my dear girl!"

After these four brief remarks Katherine spoke again.

"Sorry to hurt your feelings, dear boy, but no woman ever grows red and white about a beard unless, in the past, she has been brought into disagreeable contact with one. That's it!—depend upon it. Honora Vayne's past is a beard."

"Why do you so doggedly insist that this unfortunate young woman is burdened with a past? There's really no need to be so confoundedly sure upon the subject!"

"Don't be an ass—goat—dolt, Berr! Of *course* she's got a past! What's she here for, alone, manless, and lovely——"

"My dear girl, you are alone, manless, and—well, you aren't lovely, but your figure's good—yet no one insists *you've* got a past. Suppose people began suggesting you had murdered your husband, or something of the sort, just because you hadn't happened to have spouted out your whole history? You're just as

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likely—more so, perhaps—to have a past as Honora!"

Two light grey eyes flashed a swift, searching glance into this large man's bronzed face, but an instant later they closed, as usual, into a couple of dark-fringed slits.

Bernard's face had evidenced nothing beyond annoyance.

"It's no good getting shirty, my large brother, just because you've fallen in love with my attractive-farmeress-landlady. I'm quite as keen on Honora—in a different way!—as you are, but that doesn't blind me to facts. When are you going to be married?"

"Not at all!"

"Haven't you asked her?—she looked as if you had."

"Oh, yes, I asked her."

"And she refused?"

"Yes, she refused."

"Yet the girl's uncomfortably much in love with you! Proof positive! *A past!*" And with this Mrs. Orlitson broke into a run, leaving her brother somewhat of the opinion that a world without women would be a better place!

During supper these three people, who were all more or less poignantly affected by each other's presence, discussed agriculture, gored skirts, hurdle-racing, American cocktails, and other matters not vitally important so far as they were concerned; and it was only when Katherine left the room in order to take her iron

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tonic that Honora and Bernard found themselves alone.

The oil lamp standing in the centre of the table burnt low, and Honora stood at the window watching the feverish hurrying of a white harvest moon.

She knew that he and she were alone, but made no sign till an arm stole around her shoulders and a man's mouth touched her throat.

She leaned back against him, glad for their love-story to be continued, as she had been glad for it to be interrupted.

"Are we lovers, Honora; are we lovers?" he whispered.

She comprehended his meaning now, and her limbs grew hot. She recalled the common girl who sat beneath the shelter of the hillock.

"Honora—you must tell me!"

A scarlet longing seized her, and the old-maidish caution in her nature, of which she had spoken to Katherine, became absorbed in one great desire.

She loved this man; she had been hideously, dangerously lonely——

"Yes—we—are—lovers!" she whispered.

His head dropped lower, and in the moonlight his eyes found hers.

"My darling, my darling!" he said; and from the white warmth of her throat his lips moved up to the red warmth of her mouth. "To-night," he whispered, "*to-night!*"

The next instant Katherine returned, her quaint

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white face puckered up in recollection of the black bitter fluid which had just passed her lips.

"Ugh! I've taken enough iron in my life to make all the fenders in all the happy homes of England! I'm sure I must be a descendant of the Iron Duke! Her Grace, the Iron Duchess! That's me! Now, are we cut-throat bridging to-night?"

Honora eagerly answered that they were, and Bernard got out the cards.

Rubber after rubber they played, till at last when Katherine had lost four shillings and sevenpence, she threw down the cards and yawned a more or less polite yawn.

"Can't play any longer!—my bed's calling to me!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, let's—let's have one more!" urged Honora, feverishly commencing to reshuffle the cards.

"My dear kid, *you* are usually the slacker—why such keenness to-night?" demanded Katherine.

"B—because I really do want to—play better, and nothing but practice will teach me!"

"You play perfectly—the way you lead up to your opponents' strength is masterly!" replied Bernard rudely—that particular brand of rudeness which a man only gives to the woman he loves much more than he has ever loved any other woman.

Honora laughed without knowing exactly what she was laughing at. She had scarcely heard what he said, and only knew she ought to smile because Katherine was smiling.

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"No, my dear, I'm not going to lose any more of my hardly-earned fortune to-night!" said Mrs. Orlitson, decisively, as she rose and stood, thin, smart, and black-gowned before them. "You can play double dummy if you like——"

"No, no, we *don't* like," interrupted Honora. "Double dummy is too—too candid a game! Highly conscientious and beautifully without deception—but slow!"

"Like me! Beautiful without deception—but slow! An exact description of K. O., who, from henceforth, shall regard herself as a Double Dummy. Good-night, dear kids!" Katherine affectionately tugged at Honora's ear. "Nighty-nighty, Berr—or are you coming up to sit on the doormat and talk while I brush my vermilion locks?"

"I'll see you as far as the doormat anyway," answered Bernard lazily. "Good-night, Miss Vayne, and thanks for the game. You'd make a first-class player if only you weren't so cautious with your declarations! Good-night!"

"Good-night!" echoed Honora mechanically. She spoke only with her lips. The language of her eyes was obscured.

When they had left the room and ascended the stairs, Honora closed and locked the long French windows, put away the cards, and blew out the lamp.

Then she waited in absolute silence, lightly pressing one hand against the pulses of her throat, which seemed

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drumming right into her head and obscuring other sounds.

She wanted to listen.

They were talking still—she could hear Katherine's endless ripple of unpunctuated laughing chatter, occasionally broken by a low careless, masculine laugh. How could he laugh when—when he had said—"*To-noight!*"

"To-night—*to-noight!*" Honora found herself repeating the word again and again, till the Fullgarney accent fascinated her.

"*To-noight!*" She might be rehearsing for an amateur performance of "The Gay Lord Quex."

"*To-noight!*"

Now it was to-night and—and——

Ah, the unpunctuated laughter had ceased—the click of a door—Katherine's door clicked—the squeak of a door—Bernard's door squeaked—the bang of a door—Bernard's door banged.

Silence—silence—silence!

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CHAPTER XIV

YES, the silence was continuous!

Heaven be thanked! "To-noight" meant nothing—yet—yet——

Tightly Honora gathered her cream skirts, raising them above her ankles and drawing them in a bunch to the front, so that not a swish or rustle would be audible as she ascended the stairs. Then the low-heeled bronze shoes were discarded, and out of the moonlit room she stepped into the dark passage.

Bernard's door was shut—she would be able to reach her own room without a sound, able to lock the door, and to escape the rapture of—"*to-noight!*"

Up the solidly-built, creakless stairs, on to the first landing—up one more little flight—to her own rooms, to——

"*Ah-h-h!*"

The exclamation was hardly more than a breath, but for a second Honora must have lost consciousness as, from out the darkness of a recess, two arms were stretched—two arms which held her close.

"We are lovers, dearest, lovers!" Bernard whispered in her ear. "We shall never be anything else—you belong to me—you are mine——" They were getting nearer to her door—nearer. "And you *shall* be my

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wife—you *will* be my wife when we are lovers—you won't shy at marriage ties and conventions any longer then, because you will understand that it must be for ever—*for always!* Sweetest heart—" They were on the threshold now—in another second—— "My little girl!—call me to you, Honora—just say '*Come*,' dear—go in, darling, and call me—a man wants to be called——"

She slipped from his embrace, half swayed across the threshold, held out her arms for one second, then—*shut the door and turned the key!*

The action was characteristic of the woman, and she knew it—but it had to be!

Honora had said that she could never be entirely anything, and that self-analysis was in a measure correct.

She hadn't strength to be entirely rigorously moral, nor the strength to be entirely bravely immoral.

She had the strength to love, but failed when it came to making a supreme sacrifice for that love's sake.

She didn't possess sufficient Spartan grit to stifle woman's natural longings, to the extent of renouncing kisses which could only lead the kissers down one inevitable road; yet when it came to treading that highway of sultry shadows and deep pitfalls, she turned renegade and broke her faith.

No good, excellent person could say that Honora Vayne was not acting precisely as a well-brought-up young woman should act when she shut and locked her bedroom door; yet there are individuals—shocking, unvisitable people these!—who might aver that Bernard

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Benstead's beloved was actually more contemptible in her virtuous caution than she would have been if—well, if she had *not* shut the door.

In perfect silence Honora crouched down upon the floor.

Would he knock?

Indefinitely she thrust out her hand towards the key—then drew it back again.

If he *did* knock——

Ah! sounds!—slow, easy, quiet sounds! The footsteps of large feet—along the passage—down, down, down the little flight of stairs—a squeak—Bernard's door squeaked—a bang—Bernard's door banged——

The incident was over!

Dazed and trembling Honora slowly rose from her crouching position and turned on the gas, which is a hideous light to illumine moments of emotions.

Honora caught sight of her face in the glass—it was livid, and her eyes looked too large.

"I am glad, I am glad I had the strength," she murmured. "I must have been half mad to almost promise, yet—yet——"

Once more the dreary loneliness of the past year seemed to fill the whole room, and involuntarily Honora glanced towards the locked door.

"Must it be always like this?" she whispered, slowly unfastening hooks and removing pins till the cream cambric frock fell to the ground, leaving exposed the mournful figure of a young woman wearing a white petticoat, and pink corsets left open two inches at the

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waist. "Must I leave love alone for ever and ever—unless I am brave enough not—not to lock my door? What am I to do?—what shall I do with my poor spoilt life and myself?"

Half an hour later Honora was lying in the cool, coarse-sheeted bed, trying to solve problems which revolved round the future.

She had meant to behave so entirely differently to the way she was behaving. When she first buried herself in the safe seculsion of a Sussex chicken farm it had been her intention to leave love and romance entirely unsought, but if those two main elements of feminine existence should ferret out and find her hiding-place—why, then she would be pluckily unscrupulous, after the manner of all famous history-women who have reduced passion to a fine art and illicit love to a science.

Life was meant for love, and just because—because——

For a second Honora threw a portion of the sheet across her face, and remembered that there would be a *—to-morrow!*

Though "*to-noight*" had been spoilt by old-maidish caution and conventional alarms—that true white word "Virtue" made no pretence of obtruding itself into these mental arguments—there would still be to-morrow—to-morrow, which could make up for what "*to-noight*" had lost!

During all those hours which the big hall clock struck between midnight and mid-dawn Honora lay forming to-morrow's plans.

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Sometimes she sat up in bed and listened when it seemed that faint, stealthy sounds were audible, but at last, when the "Sussex rooster" called out "Good-morning" to the world, to-morrow was forgotten and innocence came back with sleep.

Soundly, heavily, doggedly Honora slept, unheeding the intrusion of yellow sunlight which found unscrupulous ways of entry round the sides of the blind, till at last insistent drumming on the wooden panels of the door hurried her, per express route, from that safe land of dreams.

She sat up in bed and brushed the dark falling hair from about her face.

Was this "to-noight" or—or—to-morrow?

"Will you be getting up to breakfast, please, miss? It's nearly ten o'clock," sounded Mary Tryke's slightly severe voice.

Then Honora remembered—it was to-morrow!

She leapt out of bed and opened that locked door.

"Yes—yes—bring my bath water, please—I'll be down in half an hour. I've had a bad night and overslept myself," she replied, with a hint of apology in her voice which would not have been there in different circumstances.

It is a certain fact that when men or women become apologetic to their inferiors they had nearly done something they oughtn't to have done!

Mrs. Tryke made no response. For one thing she couldn't have been sympathetic even if she wished, and for another she didn't wish; so without a word she

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shuffled down the little flight of stairs connecting Honora's bedroom with the main passage.

Honora stood for a moment listening; then, becoming conscious of the cold oilcloth's uncomfortable proximity to her bare feet, returned to bed.

She felt loth to leave the safe shelter of her own room, yet eager to get up.

How would she and Bernard meet each other and greet each other?

How would she ask him to have a second cup of coffee, or recommend the trial of a great red Victoria plum?

Yet it would be stimulating—wildly, deliciously stimulating not to meet each other's eyes, save for a stolen second when Honora was picking an egg in her specially absorbing and fanciful manner.

And they would avoid each other all day until—about evening time—a *tête-à-tête* meeting would be inevitable.

And then—and then—well, Honora didn't want to spoil indefinite possibilities by making them inartistically definite.

Perhaps she would risk everything and promise to become his wife—or perhaps she would risk a different everything, and not make any promise.

Her extraordinarily beautiful eyes looked restless, eager, and half glad; her cheeks were soft with that vivid flush which always made her quite lovely, and beneath feather-stitched tucks and Honiton insertion her gracious bosom rose and fell with expectant rapidity.

She would wear a loose white wrapper this morning—

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one of those she had brought to the farm but never unpacked. There was a thick yet softly-falling one of butter muslin, and the flapping sleeves were tied with blue ribbon.

It was an infinitely becoming garment, and she would unpack it directly Mrs. Tryke had brought the bath water.

Honora smiled joyously. She felt joyous now, for no matter what had happened or what might happen again, they would meet in less than half an hour—and newly confessed love holds no real alarms when there will be a meeting in half an hour.

And during breakfast how she would pique him and amaze him by her display of absolutely unpenetrable calm, cheerfulness, and composure!

He should find her a complete adept at love's public deceptions, while he himself grew gradually silent and ill at ease.

Then when they were alone she would still keep up the same pose till an exasperated exclamation left his lips and her hands were roughly seized and held.

It would be the fascinating drama of a day, but later, when the sun began to sink, she would confess to having remembered last night—which would then be—"*to-noight!*"—and she would then slip into his arms to drift—drift—not to any dangerous whirlpools, but just—well, perhaps he would now be content to go on drifting——

Anyhow, in half an hour they would meet—they would meet—and——

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"Tap-tap!"

Honora answered joyously, and the door opened—but not to admit Mrs. Tryke and the bath water.

It was Katherine who entered the room, Katherine, who looked decidedly cross and very nearly ugly, and who carried a letter in her hand.

"He's an idiot!" she ejaculated snappily.

"Who?" asked Honora.

"Berr!"

"Berr—your brother?"

"Yes, my confounded fool of a brother—read that!"

A paper was thrust into Honora's hand, and slowly she read the pencilled scrawl written by a hand whose touch had the power to accelerate every beat of her cautious woman's heart.

"My dear Kits,—I'm off! Didn't tell you yesterday because I hate good-byes—even *pro tem.* ones. But I must go, so by the time you read this your excellent brother will have caught the 8.50 A. M. train to town, which is by way of being a preliminary to crossing the pond again. There's business I must see to over there, but daresay I shall turn up again before you've run through all your money. Can't give you any address, but letters sent to 'The Conway Club' are always liable to reach me eventually. I enclose cheque. Please settle up with Miss Vayne; thank her for kindnesses shown to an unworthy 'P G' (don't insert an 'i'), and say that my criticism on her bridge play was faulty. The mistake she makes is in *too rash* declarations, which the weakness of her hand often prevents her from bringing

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off. My best wishes to her, and chin-chin to your smart, cute little self. Till we meet,

"Your affectionate brother,

"BERR."

"Haven't you finished reading it yet?"

Katherine put the question; then she looked round.

Honora *had* finished reading.

She was lying with her face buried in the pillow, and her shoulders tremulous with sobs.

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CHAPTER XV

It was springtime, and the gravely furnished *maisonette* was an accomplished fact.

The rent was £600 per annum; the locality was Hyde Park—OA Holstein Mansions, Hyde Park—the dining-room—large enough to dine forty *gourmands*—was schemed in black, dull oak and purple, the drawing-rooms—three, opening one out of the other—were reputable arrangements of dull green-blue, the billiard-room was a billiard-room, the bedrooms were all white, and the owner's absolutely private sanctum was a triumph of bad taste.

Every apartment, except the private sanctum, had been entirely arranged by Teddington & Co., and they had conscientiously carried out Mrs. Orlitson's instructions that, though money need not be spared, immaculate taste and refinement were not to be sacrificed for the sake of evidencing expenditure.

Art treasures might be purchased with a moderately free hand, but there must be no vulgar display of thousand-guinea vases or huge expanses of costly carving.

"If I'm left to myself I shall make my flat look like an Earl's Court Exhibition," Katherine had frankly avowed when giving the order, "therefore every room, except my own boudoir, shall be left entirely in your hands!"

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And Messrs. Teddington had not betrayed their trust. They had kept down any tendency toward dramatic upholstery, they had avoided the introduction of too much *Louis*, and they had even negotiated for the purchase of a choice selection of suitably be-stocked and short-waisted ancestors.

Mrs. Orlitson was very pleased with these ancestors —which had escaped Christies and been purchased direct from a bankrupt French nobleman—and prepared the patter which was to go with each picture.

The simpering lady with the blue snood and rather impossible bust was to be great-great-great Aunt Lucille de Mornigay, who, in 1799, had been practically banished by Napoleon because she refused the guidance of Rostand to ascend that little dark staircase leading from an obscure side entrance of the imperial palace to the Emperor's private half-storey room. (Katherine had decided that the introduction of a little moral French blood might excuse any overdone flippancies which she might not always be able to avert.)

A stern gentleman in a somewhat sombre uniform was to be one Culff John Orlitson, who in 1804 had committed suicide on account of his unrequited passion for Nelson's Emma.

And a couple of vacuous-looking youths patting one quaintly formed hound were to be respectively Hugh and Godfrey Orl*ee*tson—belonging to the days before those double "ee's" had given place to the more euphonious "i!"—who had assisted the young Pretender in his final flight back across the Channel.

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Poor Katherine had been immensely busy for two whole days in looking up likely dates and fitting them in with the costumes of these purchased ancestors.

But now, after a rather exhausting time poring over a couple of hired histories, everything seemed in order.

"Aunt Lucille"—as well as a small prim child wearing very long frills drooping over either leg—was to belong to her late mother's family, from whence the dash of French blood would come. A fierce ruffed gentleman, who might have passed for Shakespeare if his melancholy had been more pronounced, was Robert Humphrey Benstead—a relative of Katherine's father, who, according to family history—very private family history—was supposed to have interfered with the virginity of Queen Elizabeth's maids of honour.

These people she appropriated for her own maternal and paternal descendants, but the other she'd given to her late husband's family.

As Katherine said: "Poor Roger mustn't be left out when ancestors are being handed round!"

Thus now Mrs. Orlitson was ready to begin life all over again, to commence that *vie de luxe* which patience, circumstance, and luck had secured for the young woman who, exactly a year ago, was bewailing the uninspiring inconveniences of retrenchment.

For exactly two days she had been installed at OA Holstein Mansions, and now for the first time in her aspiring life her *own* visitor was going to be ushered in by her *own* manservant.

Lady Chesham was expected to call, and Katherine

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knew that much of her future social security would depend upon the attitude which she took with her old school friend, and the attitude her old school friend took with her.

Lady Chesham could float her very nicely if she chose —but the question was would she choose?

Katherine was inclined to think she would if only she could be made to think that Katherine didn't want her to; and the way to——

"*Lady Chesham!*" announced the grave footman, who was in admirable harmony with the grave flat.

Katherine rose, stuck out her thin chin, closed her light grey eyes, pursed up her lip-salved mouth, and rustled forward.

"*Dear* Evelyn, this *is* nice to see you! Fancy, nearly a year since we met! My dear, *how* you've lost in weight! You're all right, aren't you? Do come and sit down. I *long* to hear all your news!" she cried in her very lowest, most rumbling, and most thrilling voice.

Lady Chesham looked round, sat down in a perfect Queen Anne chair, and instantly decided that her friend was quite a safe person to be the possessor of a newly-made fortune.

She had quite expected to find a scheme of Moorish gorgeousness or some obtrusive oriental decorations pervading the flat, but instead everything was the final declaration in perfect taste without ostentation.

Possibly, had Lady Chesham penetrated the boudoir, with its weirdly-shaped cane and wicker chairs, its bead curtains, its oriental vases, its over-pictured walls, its

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high-art china cats and griffins, its Japanese stalks, its bewildering cushions and draperies, she might have altered her opinion and swiftly formed resolutions; but as neither Lady Chesham nor anyone else who mattered would ever penetrate this sanctum upholstered to please Katherine Orlitson's innate love of ostentation, the smart widow's social career would remain unspoilt by the baneful influence of unrefined surroundings.

Katherine knew that she longed to be ostentatious, but, unlike most people hampered by this failing, she fully realised her own weakness, and was therefore able to quell it into submission before anyone else guessed at its existence.

Katherine was quite aware that the spending of a newly-made fortune is a delicate business, and was clever enough to lay down rules for herself in the very beginning.

"You've got a charming place here, dearie!" exclaimed Lady Chesham, when her trained eye had noted the restraint displayed in the selection of wall decorations. (There was plenty of space between a dignified Poussin, a sun-glowing Lorraine, and a group of reticent Orchardsons.)

"I think it's nice—yes—but I'm very tired of choosing and planning and ordering. When one's furnishing *en pièce* it is such a temptation to put everything into the hands of one firm and to do nothing oneself except pay—or owe—the bills. But a temptation like that must be quelled. I chose, and ordered, and fitted, and harmonised everything myself, and in consequence, my

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dear, I'm a wreck—*a positive wreck!* Then there was some of our own old stored-up family rubbish to be fished out and made clean—but unpunctuated newness is too soul-shattering, isn't it? I've got poor great-great-great-great-great Aunt Lucille out of retirement, you see." Mrs. Orlitson airily waved towards the gold-and-pearl-framed miniature of the simpering lady with the impossible bust. "I always feel I get my strain of devilment, combined with virtue, from her! It *is nice*, after a prolonged period of hard-upishness, to get back again, as it were! Now, my dear, don't let me cackle any more about myself—do tell me your news!"

Evelyn Chesham gazed at her in real honest admiration. Katherine Orlitson was doing the thing splendidly—right through and through.

The Bensteads didn't by any means come of a bad stock, but Lady Chesham knew perfectly well that these "ancestors" of Katherine's were progenitors of somebody else.

She was fully aware that virtuous great-great-great-great-great Aunt Lucille was the great-great-great-great-great aunt of some unfortunate family to whom Mrs. Orlitson's cheques were useful.

But nobody else would be aware of that, and there was no doubt that Katherine would be well worth taking under her wing.

If *she* didn't discover her somebody else would; for the Holstein Mansions widow, with her red hair, perfect waist, perfect flat, striking personality and helpful fortune, would inevitably prove a "draw."

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"I haven't any news to tell," replied Evelyn, responding to the conclusion of her friend's last sentence. "Of course nothing much has begun yet, although there are signs of an early season."

"Yes, so Lady Bentive was saying—she tells me the new Serpentine Club is going to open next week instead of next month as arranged."

Lady Chesham was silent. She didn't know Katherine was acquainted with Lady Bentive. How should she know that only during the purchase of a fifty-guinea Persian kitten, Mrs. Orlitson had skilfully mentioned the opening of this new and somewhat exclusive woman's club!

"You'll join?" she queried after a moment's thought.

"Oh, I said I wouldn't—don't think I shall. It seems too early for th—that sort of thing," answered Katherine carelessly.

"Of course it isn't too early—let me put you up!"

Mrs. Orlitson puckered up her forehead.

"You know, Evelyn, I'd much rather be put up by you than any gushing new friends, but——"

This settled it. No "gushing new friends" should be the first to get hold of the wealthy widow. Certainly they shouldn't!

"I *shall* put you up, my dearest girl, and Mirian Donne shall second you. Come to lunch and meet her to-morrow. She's delightful, only Charles hates her husband—but you know what Charles is if a man addresses more than ten consecutive words to me! Yes, I insist upon your joining, and *through me!*"

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Katherine shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, well, if I give offence I can't help it. Old friends matter—new ones don't! Put me up if you like, Eve—and thanks awfully—but be ready to swear that six months ago I had arranged to be introduced by *you*. And how is Sir Charles? Othello-like as ever?"

Lady Chesham answered that he was, but she answered vaguely, for her thoughts were working swiftly.

The ancestors had *not* deceived her, but the "gushing new friends" had, and she meant to be the first to float Mrs. Orlitson now that it was quite evident other people wished to do so.

"You know, Evelyn, you will always come first—before *anyone*," said Katherine later in the afternoon, when she had instructed Orby to say "out" to anyone who might call—she knew quite as well as Orby that no one would be likely to call!—"because not only are you my old friend who knew me in the days of my threadbareness, but also my present affluence is indirectly owing to *you*. If *you* hadn't shown me Mary Laurence's grandfather's system I should never have tried Monte Carlo, and if Monte hadn't been kind I should never have been able to risk Grey Rubbers; It's *all* you! *You've* benefited me, *you've* benefited Mary Laurence insomuch that she's got a handsome percentage of my winnings, and *you've* benefited the nice honest man who recommended me 'Grey Rubbers,' because he gets a big share of my profits. Indirectly, Evelyn, it's all *you*—I *am* so grateful!"

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This was exactly the right tack to take, and Mrs. Orlitson knew it.

Let Evelyn Chesham be made to regard herself as Katherine's benefactor, and there was nothing she wouldn't do to keep up the illusion; for Lady Chesham was one of those useful individuals who insensibly take themselves at whatever valuation other people place upon them.

She was Katherine's "benefactor," and "gushing new friends" were presumably very much on the scenes! This settled everything.

"My dear," said Lady Chesham when, after the *maisonette* had been displayed—all except the boudoir—she proceeded to take her leave. "May I give you a piece of advice?"

"*Do*, dearest, *do!*" But Katherine's light grey eyes began to glitter ominously. She wasn't quite the type of person who altogether appreciated advice.

"Well, I very strongly advise you to have a companion of some sort—a woman self-effacing enough not to bother you, yet someone always on the scenes. You see, Katherine, you are young——"

"Oh, don't, Eve! Twenty-eight's an awful age—for a widow!"

"——You are young, very attractive, and somewhat on the flighty side, so until you elect to marry again I advise a nominal watch-dog!"

Katherine shuddered.

"You seem quite determined to get me fixed up again, Eve!"

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"Oh, of course, you must marry—and marry well. *I* shall see to that myself!"

"Thank you, dearest, you *are* sweet!"

Lady Chesham looked up quickly, but fortunately Katherine's left eyelid was once more in its normal position before her glance reached that locality.

"Then you'll think over what I suggest about the companion, won't you, dear?"

"I will, Evelyn—I'll not only think, but act; and probably in less than a week's time you'll find my reputation zealously guarded by two knitting needles and a salaried glare. Good-bye, dearest—yes, I'll remember lunch to-morrow!—1.30, isn't it? . . . Right! So really sweet to have seen you! Ta-ta! Don't get any thinner or you'll slip away altogether, and Sir Charles won't have anything left to adore! Good-bye!"

Directly Mrs. Orlitson was safely and securely alone she bunched her trained skirt up round her hips and danced at full tilt a breakdown which used to find special favour with Birmingham pantomime audiences.

From beneath the frills of a very bewildering black satin petticoat two black satin-shod feet energetically let off a satisfactory amount of their owner's vitality, till with a final kick which momentarily landed Mrs. Orlitson's toe on a level with the ethereal Corot landscape, the Holstein Mansions widow allowed her exuberance to subside into an artistically uncomfortable chair.

"Hurray! Hurrah!! Hurroo!!!" she ejaculated in tones that were safely subdued. "Let me once get in the Serpentine Club and take up with the best members,

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and I'm floated! One thing leads to another so quickly when a woman dresses well and has got warbling oof-birds! If I hadn't lied about Evelyn's loss of weight—poor soul, she *has* spread in twelve months!—touched upon the purchased husband's jealousy, insinuated about gushing new friends, and mentioned Lady Bentive, everything might have been all 'no go'; but now it'll all be righter than rain! I shall soon get things in order now, and be able to present a dramatic triumph of love and mystery entitled '*The Widow Remated*' or '*The Red-haired Rogue's Lover*'! Good heavens, I'm a wonderful woman! I always used to tell Roger I was—and it's true! An absolutely *wonderful* woman!"

When Mrs. Orlitson had recovered from this perfectly excusable burst of self-admiration, she proceeded to consider Lady Chesham's suggestion of a widow's watch-dog—and shuddered.

Katherine wasn't at heart a woman s woman, although, for purposes of policy and fashion, she was quite ready to appear as such—a necessary pose in these days of national sex-antagonism and hen bridge-parties.

There were so few women who took a private boudoir —"*Damn*"—for what it was worth, and so few could quarrel comfortably.

No companion of her own sex had ever been entirely satisfactory, except Honora, who——

"Ah!—yes—*Honora!*"

Mrs. Orlitson ejaculated these three words, stuck out her chin, and sat forward in her chair.

Honora! If only she could be induced to leave the

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chicken farm, who could make a more ideal companion? It was the end of February when Katherine left Upper Deerbuck Farm to spend a couple of months by the sea while Teddington & Co., Ltd., were arranging the flat and supplying heirlooms, and now it was the middle of April.

Over seven weeks since she had left a tall pale girl, whose dark eyes held everything but happiness, standing in a low doorway waving good-byes.

Honora wasn't happy; she had never been happy since Berr's abrupt departure at the end of September. So why—why shouldn't she come and guard Mrs. Orlitson's reputation in return for a liberal salary and lots of frocks?

Katherine thought over the matter for exactly half an hour and five minutes, at the end of which time her definite decision was formed.

She would asked Honora to come.

She wanted Honora to come.

And, hitherto, most things which Mrs. Orlitson wanted had eventually taken place!

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CHAPTER XVI

It was cold, very cold for April, and the chickens were still treated to a hot breakfast of mashed potatoes, bread, and other delicacies which Honora cooked in a small cellar under the granary.

She plunged a long toasting fork into the copper of boiling water.

Yes, the potatoes were quite soft—they could be taken out now, and mashed.

Honora commenced her steamy task—not by any means an unpleasant cold-weather occupation, and one which last year she had performed with somewhat enthusiastic enjoyment.

But now she wasn't enthusiastic about anything. She was glad when profits increased, but experienced no acute pleasure.

Since last September, and more especially since Katherine's departure, she felt like a woman who didn't mind being middle-aged.

If she were thirty-three or forty-three instead of twenty-three, it wouldn't really matter in the least, for she had no further use for her youth!

Conscientiously, Honora mashed the potatoes and bread, then stepped out into the cold spring sunshine, where feathered things of all ages and sizes awaited her arrival.

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The black Leghorn hen who, in September, had not been allowed to become the parent of "blackberry chicks," now fluttered proudly round a brood of fluffy offspring, while the red Sussex rooster was still very much cock of the promenade.

With strict impartiality Honora apportioned the steaming breakfast, till, just as the rooster was forcibly taking potato out of his favourite wife's beak, the postman appeared at the bend of the rutted drive.

Honora ceased adjudicating in this marital dispute, and ran to meet the shambling figure.

Dan's slothful shamble maddened her. It was always possible that he might bring something—something which would revive the gladness of her youth—therefore his dilatory methods proved insupportable.

"Something for me, Dan?" she cried, trying to keep hope out of her voice.

"Aye, that it be—two degrees first thing," he responded.

Dan's deafness was trying, but less so than his fumbling methods of searching a large canvas bag.

At last the letter was produced—it was a picture postcard addressed to "Mr. Tryke," and displaying a chaste view of some unimportant cathedral!

Honora felt dangerous. Just lately it seemed that Mary Tryke and her husband had developed an amazing taste for the export and import of picture postcards. The export didn't matter, but the import was maddening, and Honora felt there ought to be a law precluding the receipt of correspondence by *employés*.

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"Nothing else, Dan?"

"Aye—only this!"

And "only this" proved to be a black-bordered envelope addressed in Katherine Orlitson's inconsequent handwriting—Katherine Orlitson who, apart from any other attractions she might possess, was the *sister of Bernard Benstead!*

Conscientiously, and with a feeling of unjust resentment, Honora put Tryke's missive on the ledge of the kitchen window-sill; then, entering the parlour, she tore open the black-bordered envelope and proceeded to read its contents.

"AO Holstein Mansions.

"Most dearest Honora,—I'm here, and feel immensely pleased with myself and surroundings. In fact, I've really got everything I want except one thing —and that is YOU! Now, my dark-eyed feeder of fowls, attend to me and heed my suggestions and prayers without prejudice.

"(1) I am lonely in my new life, and need a pal.

"(2) I miss you intensely, because you are the only feminine person I have ever found congenial.

"(3) Will you come and live with me—or anyhow pay me a very prolonged visit?

"(4) If you consent, matters can be arranged in this way: Tryke and his wife can be left in complete control of the farm, sending you a weekly statement of receipts and expenditure. I undertake to pay the Trykes' extra wages. I undertake to keep you provided with pretty clothes and £200 a year pocket money.

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"(5) I yearn and pray you to come *at once.*

"Now, dearest of fowl-feeders, do, do, DO consent! If you have any affection for a lonely, red-haired, thin, candid widow of 27½!—steadily retrograding, please note!—you'll wire instantly saying '*Expect me in three days.*' If you don't like it you shall return to your roosters at once—I promise this—but *do* come! Honora, save me melancholia and loneliness!—come—come!

"Awaiting your wire with tumultuous heart-thuds,

"Your lonely and affectionate widow chum,

"KATHERINE."

Honora crushed the letter tightly in one hand, while the flush which made her beautiful flooded her cheeks. It was months now since she had been beautiful.

She wanted to go intensely.

Risk or no risk, she must face the world again—besides there could be no real risk—nothing could happen—nothing could really be demanded of her.

The chicken farm had seemed a safe harbour, a safe hiding place; but, after all, viewing the matter in a calm, common-sense manner, why should she hide?

Honora looked out of the window, and instead of preening hens, inconsequent chicks, bursting trees, and the distant line of ocean made restless by spring winds, she seemed to see Piccadilly Circus, the Park, and even the supreme ugliness of Oxford Street!

For nearly two years she had not thought of these things, but now Katherine's letter aroused all the Lon-

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don-longings which slumber in every attractive woman's heart.

Pretty frocks!

Honora felt as though her legs and hips were already clasped in the embrace of silk-lined skirts, and it seemed as though a Bond Street toque *must* be perched on her head.

Whirr-r-r! The rumble of London streets! *Swish-swish-swish!* The trail of silk-lined skirts.

They were calling, calling—those London voices—she could hear them above the arrogance of the red Sussex rooster, who was now standing on a heap of steaming straw, telling his wives all about the glory of male supremacy, which the poor feathered dears blindly believed.

And Katherine!—Honora felt it would be joyous to once more hear Katherine's unpunctuated, inconsequent nonsense.

Katherine's flippancy had been so stimulating—every remark was like a dose of verbal sal volatile—and then Katherine was—was—yes, she was Bernard Benstead's sister.

And that was the main point of all!

Bernard had written in the eight-months-ago pencilled note that he would turn up before Katherine's money was all spent, and if he turned up, where would it be except at his sister's flat?

Sometimes Honora tried to deceive herself, to pretend that she had forgotten those kisses in the hush of the woods, as modern women do forget most pass-

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ing interludes which leave no important traces behind.

But the self-deception and pretence were sorry, futile efforts, and Katherine's letter had shattered them all as eggshell china is shattered—in a thousand irreparable pieces.

She *never* could forget those kisses in the hush of the wood. At twenty-three years old they had taught her to grow up!

Since then her life had been like the bass of a duet—subservient, monotonous, waiting to make harmonies round a melody.

Honora put Katherine's letter in her pocket, and leaving the house hurried toward the styes, where she knew Tryke would be found attending to the domestic needs of Bessie and her kin.

"Good-morning, Tryke," she called out with the spring-time in her voice.

"G'morning, miss. (Hoo-up, old lady! Now, none of your tares!)"

"Tryke!"

"S'miss? (Nah! none o' that, my booty.)"

"If I went away for a long holiday—say for four or six months—could you and Mary take entire control of the farm?"

"That mostly what we do now, miss, so ter speak."

Honora smiled. She felt no resentment at this slight cast upon her own importance—only relief.

"Well, if you were paid extra wages and received a percentage of profits, would you undertake to

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carry on the farm as successfully as it's carried on now?"

Tryke's sense of humour was even less than that usually possessed by the browned and horny-handed British agriculturist, but even into his stolid eyes darted a flash of something which might have done duty for amusement.

"If me and th' missis did our own way without no interference, so ter speak, there wouldn't be no cause for complaint," was his tactful reply.

Honora understood, and laughed. It seemed easy to laugh to-day.

"Then that settles it, Tryke. To-day is Monday—on Thursday I'll go away for a long holiday, and leave everything in your hands. I daresay you'll find it difficult to get on without me at first, but you'll soon shake down!"

There was a mischievous school-girl malice in this last remark, and Honora purposely darted off before Tryke should be faced with the difficulty of finding a reply.

"Harry! Harry!"

A youth and a sack appeared at the loft doorway.

"I want you to leave what you are doing and go to the post office."

"Ayh?"

"Get down at once and come to the hall—I'll have the telegram written by the time you are ready."

"Ayh!"

Back to the house, into the parlour, up to the ink-

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bespattered writing-table—a pencil—a sheet of paper —sixpence!

"To Orlitson, OA Holstein Mansions, London. Coming gladly. Expect me Thursday. Writing.—HONORA."

She didn't know quite why she was writing, but as no telegraphic message is complete without this unnecessary assurance, and as Honora meant to use every fraction of her sixpennyworth, "writing" might just as well go in!

The "potato boy"—such was the messenger's official designation—set out on his mission—the spring sun increased to mid-day warmth—the hens clucked among themselves as though they were discussing the situation and whispering to each other that *they* knew exactly why She was going to London—they'd seen a bit, those hens had, and the chinchilla muff Wyandotte *had* been known to stray as far as the woods!—the pigs passed a grunting verdict on the subject—and Tryke was already forming a system—which did considerable credit to his rural intellect—by means of which accounts could be "cooked to a turn."

Then came Mrs. Orlitson's orange-sheathed reply:

"To Vayne, Upper Deerbuck Farm, Transley Road, Sussex. Wingless Angel and Sublime Feeder of Fowls! Welcome! A red-haired widow's grovelling thanks at your feet! All hail Thursday! Hallelulah!

"KATHERINE THE GRATEFUL."

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Honora read this effervescing one-and-three-penny worth of unpunctuated nonsense, and felt that she could almost hear a low-toned, rapid, rumbling voice and see a thin, perfectly-waisted black figure.

Katherine was delicious! She loved Katherine! She longed to see Katherine!—and, quite incidentally she loved Katherine's brother!

Monday ended, Tuesday came to a close, Wednesday ran its course, then Thursday dawned with a hint of very distant summer on the vividly clear horizon.

Honora was up with the earliest rising lark in Sussex, and before breakfast she was wandering through the woods, where love had found her out and taught her to grow up.

She looked at the exact spot where she and Bernard had stood wrapped in the magnetism of each other's embrace, and from the moist brown earth a ghost seemed to rise.

It was the ghost of a large man wearing a blue suit and carrying a sixpenny stick—a large man whose unmoral mouth was touched by the hint of a smile, and who held out his arms.

"It'll be all right this time, Bernard," cried Honora, speaking aloud and startling nest-building birds in the boughs. "You'll come to me in London, won't you? You'll come, Bernard, *you'll come?*"

And through the woods came the whistle of east-born breezes—a whistle which sounded like the wraith of a "YES."

Three hours later the one ramshackle fly from Trans-

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ley Station stood at the door. One large trunk was reposing imperiously beside the driver, and another occupied the back seat of the fly.

A tall girl dressed in grey tweed and with touches of violets in her hat took the opposite place.

"Good-bye, Tryke — good-bye, Mary—good-bye, Harry! Mind you look after yourselves! Be sure to tickle Bessie and talk to her twice a day—I've never seen a pig so dependent on human companionship—and let me have letters three times a week! Good-bye, my chicks—good-bye, Julia—good-bye, Portia—good-bye, Bluebeard—good-bye—bye——"

The fly jolted down the rutted drive—the red Sussex rooster crowed "God-speed" from the top of the wall —the sun shone gaily, and the sea-sky line merged from grey to blue!

Honora looked back until the very last—tears shed a mist across her extraordinarily beautiful eyes—the fly turned the corner——

Upper Deerbuck Farm had become a memory, and spring-time's hope was in the air.

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CHAPTER XVII

"CHINA tea and rusks."

Lady Chesham gave the order; one of the Serpentine Club's good-mannered waiters took it—the club had been opened less than a month, so good manners still prevailed among the attendants—then she opened an illustrated paper and read an enthralling reply to a correspondent whose pseudonym of "*Embonpoint*" at once created links of sympathy.

Lady Chesham little knew that a high-collared, cigarette-smoking sub-sub-sub-editor, who played ten shilling points on a salary of £2 5s. per week, was responsible both for "*Embonpoint's*" query and reply; therefore she read and believed with all the eagerness of one who suffers from the tragedy of increasing waist measurement.

"Of course you mustn't despair, Embonpoint—why should you when Madame Aurélia's flesh-absorbing cream can be bought for five shillings and ninepence a jar? Do not on any account compress your figure, although first rate corsets which restrain without confining—like those made by Patrice et Cie, of 010, Hanover Street, for the absurdly low sum of £4 4s.—are of service in keeping back spreading tendencies. Take a glass of Reinsbad Water—two shillings and one penny per bottle of all reputable chemists—before breakfast, and immediately commence a course of Mrs.

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de la Carr's Siberian Gymnastics—£8. 8s. the course, at 15, Park Gardens, Lancaster Gate. These will almost instantly reduce flesh, and if adopted in conjunction with Dr. Payhaiter's Electric Prodding Massage—arrangements have been made that this extraordinarily valuable remedy can be taken together with the Siberian Gymnastics, by payment of an extra £6 6s.—you will find——"

"Not playing in the billiard tournament, Lady Chesham?"

Lady Chesham laid aside the fears and hopes of "*Embonpoint*" to smile encouragingly at the speaker—one Mrs. Burham, who secretly eked out her pension by means of Society columns signed "*Sotto Voce*," and who could often be relied upon to return hospitality that was worth while by a par, and to reward information that was worth while, by introductions that were worth while.

Mrs. Burham lived mainly on the worth-while system, and found it pay.

She was hipless, angular, upright, gowned by dress agencies, booted by misfits, complexioned by presentation cosmetics, jewelled by the Scandinavian Diamond Company—one "par" a ring, two "pars" a bracelet, and a half a column a necklet—and furred through exchange-and-mart advertisements.

Mrs. Burham practically supported herself and three marriageable daughters who didn't marry, on "pars"—so much so, that a novelist, who was unsuccessful on account of his talents, gave birth to an apt riddle.

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"Why are the Misses Burham like the children of a skilful courtesan?"

"Because they are supported by different pa(r)s!"

The riddle reached Mrs. Burham's Scandinavian diamond-studded ears, and in "Cousin Lilette's" next week's "Town Tale-Tellings" the novelist's last book was alluded to as "*a dull volume full of dull pages, commendable on account of its high moral tone and almost Calvinistic strain of purity, but dismal and yawn-inducing from beginning to end.*"

It was never wise to annoy Mrs. Burham.

"No, I didn't enter for this one because my exacting husband grumbles at everything which keeps me too much occupied. Miss Mostyn-Crag and my little friend, Mrs. Orlitson, are in for the finals, aren't they?"

"Yes, I think they are. Smart little woman that Mrs. Orlitson—but why *does* she use the name of 'Dylke'?"

"Dylke! Katherine never—*no, no, china tea and rusks!*"—as the good-mannered waiter brought coffee and toasted scones. He had been accustomed to service in ladies' clubs! "Katherine never uses the name of 'Dylke'!"

"My dear Lady Chesham"—Mrs. Burham was very brisk and definite—"excuse me, but she *does!*"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that last week-end I went down to stay at the Porkensteins' place in Buryshire, and on Sunday morning strolled over to the only inn the village pos-

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sesses to inspect an oak settee that I heard was for sale. I offered a quarter the price they were asking for the settee, then amused myself by looking at the visitors' books—visitors' books are always interesting, I think, don't you? There had been no fresh entries for a week except one—'*Mr. and Mrs. Dylke—Landly Cross!*' I wondered if these might happen to be connected with the trust fund case Dylkes, you know, and enquired of the waiter just as two people strolled across the lawn. '*That's Mr. and Mrs. Dylke, madame—they're leaving to-night,*' he answered. I glanced with mild interest at the people, and saw your attractive red-haired friend, or somebody exactly like her—accompanied by rather a decent-looking man!"

Lady Chesham smiled with amusement that was not feigned.

"My dear Mrs. Burnham, you really ought to wear glasses! Certainly you've mistaken someone else for Mrs. Orlitson! Good gracious! I don't believe Katherine knows a single man who hasn't been introduced to her by us, and—er—really, Mrs. Burnham, that is rather a dangerous sort of thing to say of a fellow club-member, isn't it?"

"Not at all, when I distinctly said 'Mrs. Dylke' might have been *someone exactly like Mrs. Orlitson*—but it really was a most extraordinary resemblance!—quite a case of 'doubles'! Has your friend been a widow long?"

"Over a year!"

"Really! Left fairly well off?"

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"Katherine Orlitson is quite a rich woman, and is already beginning to be a distinct success."

"Is she?—*is* she? Well, she's got a perfect figure, and—now I come to think of it, this 'Mrs. Dylke' *hadn't*, and possibly her hair was more carroty than Mrs. Orlitson's. But it really was an amusing likeness. I must tell Mrs. Orlitson when I get to know her better—I should like to know her better! Such an attractive voice! Bring her in next Sunday to see me, if you can—you know my Sunday scrambles—weak tea and celebrities from four to seven! *Do* come—good-bye—I'm due at the Gunages'—good-bye!"

When Mrs. Burham had trailed a *demodé*, soiled, and second-hand Doucet skirt through the swing door, Lady Chesham got up quickly and decided she wouldn't wait any longer for the china tea and rusks. (The good-mannered waiter hadn't yet rectified his primary error in connection with coffee and scones, though probably it would only be a very few moments before he obligingly appeared with chocolate and pastries).

Katherine would give her tea, and she wanted to see Katherine.

When Lady Chesham reached Holstein Mansions it was to learn that both Mrs. Orlitson and Miss Vayne had come in ten minutes ago, and before tea had passed from the outer drawing-room into the inner one Katherine was putting effective kisses on both her cheeks.

"You nice thing!" she cried, pushing Evelyn Chesham on to exactly the chair she knew to be most

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desirable for a wearer of Madame Effine's *spécialité* long-fronted corsets. "It seems ages since I saw you! —quite a whole horrid day—and I was just writing to ask you and Sir Charles to come and dine on Tuesday. Just you two, the Percivals, the Gunways, and a couple of odd men things to balance Honora and me. You *will* come, won't you?"

"We shall be delighted, dear, and——"

"*That's* right! I'll ask the others now that I know my benefactress is free. Honora and I always call you the 'G.B.'—Generous Benefactress, you know! Have you been Park-ing to-day?"

"No, I've just come from the club, and—*Katherine, what were you doing last Sunday?*"

Mrs. Orlitson jerked—the question was bewilderingly sudden and apparently inconsequent—then she screwed up her white, featureless face.

"Last—Sunday? Last Sunday? Last Sunday?" she repeated rapidly. "Surely it was on Sunday that Honora and I went down to pay a surprise visit to her chicken farm and to see that things were all right, and —oh! ah!——" as the door opened and Miss Vayne entered the room; "here she is herself to verify the truth of my statement. Honora"—turning round so that only Honora could see her face—"it *was* on Sunday that *we* were at your chick-chick nursery, *wasn't* it?"

Honora paused the fractional part of a second, read Katherine's face, and inferred a lie while soothing her conscience by the assurance that she was speaking the truth.

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"Sunday! Yes—of course—we were at the farm on Sunday," she answered.

And so they had been at the farm on a great many Sundays, and because on this particular Sunday Honora had gone down there by herself, real, solid, legitimate facts were not altered!

No, it was really quite all right—she had taken a cue without actually staining her soul.

"Yes, I thought so; only my memory's so bad I can never remember what happens from one day to another! And now, *chère*-est of Evelyns, why such almost alarmed interest in my movements last Sunday?"

Lady Chesham looked apologetic and uncomfortable.

"It's too absurd, dear, only Mrs. Burham—you know, she belongs to the Serpentine—the 'par' fiend, they call her—insists that she saw you at some little inn at Buryshire; that you were with a man, and staying there under the name of 'Mrs. Dylke'!"

Katherine went into delighted convulsions of laughter.

"No such luck!" she cried, with a complete return of the unchecked dare-devilishness which had been slightly moderated since her installation at Holstein Mansions. "It's quite humiliating to think that though I've been on the market again for over a year not a single bid has been made! '*Mrs. Dylke!*' How screaming! I really feel rather flattered, though I suppose I ought to be turning my attention to libel actions. Do introduce me to Mrs. Brumm—or Burham—I *must* show her I'm myself and not the naughty—naughty week-end lady! Ha-ha-ha!"

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Lady Chesham joined in the laughter, Honora mechanically echoed the ripples, and a few moments later conversation had wandered far afield from the red-haired Mrs. Dylke at the Buryshire inn.

Half an hour afterwards Lady Chesham took her departure, leaving Honora and Katherine alone.

Katherine pummelled one or two cushions, and rather aimlessly altered the position of a chair; then she turned to Honora, who was glancing through the slippery pages of a current *magazine de luxe*.

"You were a brick to help me with my little white prevarication," she rattled out, speaking lower, faster, and more indistinctly than usual. "Directly Eve demanded what I'd been doing last Sunday, I, with my quick wit—you don't know what express-rate wits I've got, Ora!—realised that she thought I'd been doing something I oughtn't to do; and not being able to remember that I'd spent a dull day by myself and gone to bed early longing for your return next day, I just lied, because lies sounded more circumstantial than the truth! In point of fact, I couldn't *remember* the truth, but you helped me out beautifully! You're a prop, Honora, and there's nothing so useful as for two women to prop up the other. Neither one is likely to come a cropper if the other one's staunch, and—and—I'm just as staunch as you are, old girl—*if ever you want it!* Now I premise that it's clothing time if we want to grub at 7.30 and catch the overture, so scuttle along, my staunch prop, and make yourself divine in *crêpe de Chine!*"

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When Honora reached her own bedroom she sat down on a white enamelled chair and asked herself some questions.

(1) Was there any special significance in Mrs. Orlitson's voice when she promised staunchness *should Honora ever want it?*

(2) Did she vaguely guess or vaguely suspect?

(3) Why was Katherine so desperately anxious to prove an *alibi?*

(4) Who *was* this red-haired week-end lady seen by Mrs. Burham?

(5) Why did Katherine tell Honora that she'd spent last Sunday "mooning about bewailing her absence, and going to bed early," when—through a chance remark dropped by the lady's maid—Honora discovered that Mrs. Orlitson had been away from early Sunday morning till early Monday morning?

(6) Where did Mrs. Orlitson spend that day and night?

(7) What did it all mean?

But as no satisfactory reply to any of these queries was forthcoming, Honora left off making demands upon her reasoning powers and began to dress.

After all, Katherine's secrets—if she had any—were no more business of hers than *her* sec——

Manette, the maid, entered at this juncture, and Miss Vayne's toilet began.

Heliotrope and violets suited her remarkably well.

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CHAPTER XVIII

Mrs. Orlitson slowly revolved in front of the white-framed Psyche glass, and decided she looked like a stylish medium-sized snake with a perfect waist and a white face.

Cocuillet Sœurs had made a startling success of black satin covered with black spangle-embroidered chiffon, and the cut of the *décolletage* invested bony shoulders with a distinctive charm.

Mrs. Orlitson's shoulders were undiscussably bony, but as they led to the promise of a bust that came in exactly the right place to suit present fashions, and were white as gardenias, only a George IV. or a Reubens would have wished to alter the existing state of things —and bones.

Likewise, the black velvet fillet terminating in a black bird of paradise, which swept backwards over the red of her hair to the white of her thin back, made Katherine all that a woman of thirty—twenty-seven and a half—need be.

"Would one touch of *rouge* improve me, d'you think, Manette?" she asked of the maid, whose French accent was commendably industrious.

"Most times, madame, *not*, for madame's *spécialité* is that of *une pâleur claire!* But to-night—just—one *soupçon*—yes!"

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The *soupçon* was applied—high up near the cheek bones—two more *soupçons* on either ear, and the smallest *soupçon* on the chin. Then Katherine Orlitson went downstairs, feeling that if her features had been different she would have been a beautiful woman.

But her features weren't different—which was a good thing. It would have entirely spoilt her to be a beautiful woman.

In the farthest drawing-room Honora was seated.

That strange *waiting* look which the advent of Bernard Benstead had dispelled was slowly returning to her eyes, and with the vivid flush absent from her cheeks she wasn't looking her best.

As Katherine entered she rose—the heavy cream satin skirt hung with divine dignity from her uncompressed waist—and uttered an entirely feminine gasp of admiration.

Mrs. Orlitson appreciated the gasp, and pirouetted.

"All right? Eh? What? So? Not? Yes?" she enquired.

"More than all right—diabolically attractive! Even Sir Charles' watery, stationary eye *must* rove to-night! It's almost inhospitable for a hostess to look so—so—extinguishing!" replied Honora with spontaneous sincerity.

Katherine swirled, performed a double leg-twist culminating in a high kick, then came to anchor and inspected her companion.

"You look nice of course," she said reflectively. "Your eyes, and long legs, and hair must prevent you

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from looking anything else—and of course your neck and arms are indecorously beautiful. But I wish you'd —you'd look as if—as if—you *cared* more *how* you looked! A woman's chief charm lies in caring how she looks. *Don't* you care?"

For a moment Honora forgot that she was not quite alone with her heartache.

"I don't think so—it isn't worth while," she answered in a voice that sounded flat and middle-aged.

Katherine looked at her, and came closer.

"It'll be worth while soon, dear—it's bound to be!" she answered gently.

And a second later Honora's cheek was kissed by warm lip-salved lips.

She smiled, held Katherine's hand very tightly for one moment—then commented on the success of Mrs. Orlitson's coiffure.

Katherine responded flippantly as usual, but made up her mind that if it was in any way possible for Bernard to be brought back, he must be brought.

She didn't like Honora to think things "weren't worth while," and she didn't like to hear that middle-aged note in her voice.

"Who am I to go in with?" asked Honora, forcing herself to feel very much interested.

"One of the make-weight unmarried men—Arnold Smith, I think," replied Katherine carelessly.

"Arnold Smith? I haven't met or heard you speak of him. Who is he?"

"Oh! he's just a—person. Not bad—anecdotal,

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clean-shaven, goes through all the courses. He's a man poor Roger and I met on our honeymoon—Roger got very chummy with him—and I came across him at the Carlton or somewhere the other day, and as he's presentable and not overdone by every other hostess, I asked him to make up for to-night. I don't think you'll mind him, and——"

"*Mr. and Mrs. Percival!*"

Mrs. Orlitson stuck out her thin chin and rustled forward as though greeting this robust magistrate and his placid wife was the one supreme joy of her whole existence.

"Miss Vayne and I have been military tournamenting this afternoon," she said when the handshakes were concluded. "It was awfully exciting, really, but I'm *sure* they settle beforehand which sides shall come off best in the tugs and encounters and things. I saw one huge, black-moustached Lancer snigger with amusement when he won the—oh! Honora, *do* tell Mrs. Percival about our sniggering Lancer and——"

"*Sir Charles and Lady Chesham!*"

"I've a good mind to send you home again, Eve! (How are you, Sir Charles—I'll try to forgive her for your sake. You actually passed me—*passed me* at Prince's this afternoon! I coughed and spluttered, but you *wouldn't* look at my box, and when I went down to skate you'd disappeared. I *do* hate being passed—I sort of resent my own lack of magnetism. *You* do plenty of passing, don't you, Mr. Percival—Mrs. Percival—Lady Chesham—passing sentences upon poor

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people who only sin through force of circumstances and——"

"*Sir Godfrey Speer!*"

"Ah! Sir Godfrey"—as a smiling, pink-blue-and-flaxen youth pressed her hand and looked dinner-party love into her eyes—"we're just talking about sinning through force of circumstance. Is that the way with *you*, sir, or are your crimes nicely planned beforehand?"

"I never sin, Mrs. Orlitson. I'm like that opera chap—what's his name, with the long curls?—who's never learnt to sin!" replied the pink baronet, whose perfect feet were placed in a most well arranged attitude.

"*Haven't* you? *How* tiring! Honora, do persuade Sir Godfrey not to be so fatiguingly perfect!"

"*Colonel and Miss Gunway!*"

A clinging gowned sister was followed by a moustached and white-waistcoated brother—then Mrs. Orlitson's little *dîner a dix* was complete, except for one make-weight man.

For ten minutes everybody continued to babble superfluities with the utmost ease and apparent pleasure, but after that there was less spontaneity.

Mrs. Orlitson chatted faster than usual, and might have been seen to glance anxiously at the clock while the "*soupçons*" on each of her cheeks grew too vivid.

At last there was a lull—one of those lulls which mean internal calls for food and politely suppressed bad temper.

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Katherine felt the situation and plunged boldly into it.

"Of *course* our fifth man is late!" she cried, as though the unappeased hunger of her guests and the steady ruin of *salmon à la Régence* were the most pleasing of social circumstances. "My poor husband used to say '*Arnold Smith would be late at his own funeral*'—he was a chum of poor Roger's when we were honeymooning. Unpunctuality is one of the crimes I *don't* understand. Honora and I are never late for anything—but that may be because we have our very private clocks and watches sixty minutes fast, and always keep on pretending to ourselves that it really is the time we think it is!"

"What a cunning plan!" cooed Miss Gunway, who had already wearied Sir Godfrey out by a minute description of a water-colour sketch hung on the third row and twentieth from the nearest door in room eight of a new one-man gallery, just opened in Bond Street.

"Yes, it's not uncute, is it?" (*Heavens! that salmon! Would the ghost of a flake remain?*) "Honora says it makes life longer and keeps us an hour younger than we think we are——" (*Oh! Sir Charles' side teeth begin to look like the incisors of a starving wolf!*) "I can't quite follow the idea myself, but——"

"*Mr. Arnold Smith!*"

There was no need for poor Katherine's inconsequent chatter to continue, no need for eight hungry

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human beings to make effort at polite reply—the tenth make-weight man had arrived!

"Really, Mrs. Orlitson, I'm desperately sorry," he murmured, almost forgetting to shake hands in his contrite embarrassment.

"I'm *not* going to say you've no reason not to be sorry, Mr. Smith, because such a statement wouldn't be sincere," replied Katherine, with a hint of real snappishness in her voice. "But I'll try to forgive, and Miss Vayne will award you necessary censure during dinner. (Mr. Smith—Miss Vayne.) Now, Mr. Percival, if you'll escort Lady Chesham—er—er—(Colonel Gunway—Mrs. Percival)—er—(Sir Godfrey—Miss Gunway)—(Yes, please, Mr. Smith—Miss Vayne is *quite* ready to commence her lectures!)—and *please*, Sir Charles, take pity upon me."

"It's always my luck that if there *is* to be a block or a breakdown, these eventualities will always occur just when I've allowed five minutes for a ten minutes' drive!" was Arnold Smith's first remark after he and Honora had taken their places at the oval table, which to-night was decorated with an effective display of spring verdure—grasses, mosses, and budding branches, but not a single flower.

"That's very unfortunate, but you'd find it a good plan to allow fifteen minutes for a ten minutes' drive, instead of five!" answered Honora demurely. She rather liked this pleasant-voiced man who was now helping himself to the largest and plumpest of the proffered *hors d'œuvre* sardines.

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Arnold Smith laughed quietly, and landed the sardine.

"I always do *allow* it," he said, "but somehow I never seem to take advantage of my own generosity. I believe I must have been born late, and feel sure I shall be horribly behind time in dying!" Then having placed a dash of cayenne on the sardine, the late Roger Orlitson's chum began his dinner.

Honora glanced sideways at him, and saw that his clean-shaven face was more round than oval, that his chin was full, curved, and soft—the chin of a man whose policy it would be to let matters take their course—that his mouth retained the character of his whole face, and that his centre-parted hair was a shade longer than it ought to have been, except in the case of a recognised follower of art.

One loop of his tie showed vague symptoms of escaping the pass, his centre stud wasn't entirely through the slit, and the top button of his waistcoat was almost undone.

A heedless, careless man, but a nice man!

"You are the proud owner of several hundred happy fowls, are you not, Miss Vayne?" was the next observation, made before *potage à la reine* claimed his attention.

"Yes! But how do you know?" exclaimed Honora in surprise.

"For the simple reason that when I ran up against Mrs. Orlitson at Claridge's the other day she told me that the solitude of her flat was temporarily

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shared by a charming friend named Miss Honora Vayne, who owned a charming chicken farm in Sussex."

"I see. Well, omitting the adjectives, that information is quite correct—I am Honora Vayne, and I am the possessor of a somewhat badly-managed chicken farm. Are you fond of rural life, Mr. Smith?"

"I can't say I'm keen. I always keep to cities, if I can, where electric light and hot water are laid on. For some time now I've been a sort of loose end careering about the globe, but I've never gone outside the radius of where electric light and hot water are laid on."

"Some people are never meant to rough it. I always tell Mrs. Orlitson that she can——"

"Yes, *what* do you tell Mrs. Orlitson?" came a low thrilling voice from the curve of the oval table. Katherine had been babbling very satisfactorily to the monosyllabically cynical Sir Charles, but when her light grey eyes narrowed into slits, those slits were very frequently turned in the direction of Honora and the guest who had nearly spoilt the salmon.

"I was saying to Mr. Smith how I always tell you that though you may force yourself to be picturesquely rural you were never meant to rough it," replied Honora.

"Ah! but I *have* roughed it," responded Katherine, bending forward with one of those implike smiles touching her lip-salved mouth. "I remember spending one

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terrible week at a place called Seedlingditch. It was before poor Roger died, and we were retrenching in a rustic cottage—and believe me, Mr. Smith, I actually *washed plates* and *scrubbed floors! Can* you imagine my doing that?"

"I might imagine your making the effort, Mrs. Orlitson, but I can't imagine your remaining amiable throughout the ordeal," replied Honora's neighbour with a lazy laugh.

"Ah! well, I *did*—— I positively assert I was a paragon of industry and amiability."

"Were you, really?"

The words were innocuous, but the tone in which they were uttered was full of courteous rudeness.

Katherine bubbled with laughter.

"Yes, I was *really*, and—oh! do tell us that story about the lady who could seem amiable in seven different languages yet was really using polite imprecations all the time! I remember you told poor Roger and me at Cairo—it was awfully good!"

Mr. Smith's face grew plump with gratification, and as a lull followed Mrs. Orlitson's suggestion, he begun to tell an excellent story with excellent point and gesture.

Everybody listened, and from that moment the make-weight man was a success.

He was an admirable *raconteur*, and Katherine vaguely let it be known that he was an excellent singer, an excellent bridge-player, an excellent golfer, an excellent shot, and an excellent amateur actor, till both

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Lady Chesham and Mrs. Percival decided that his name should be on their next list of invitations.

Honora felt faintly puzzled. She couldn't quite make out why Katherine was, in this very subtle and skilful manner, advertising Mr. Arnold Smith.

Probably no one else was observing the advertising process, but Honora, who knew most of Mrs. Orlitson's methods, felt no doubt upon the subject.

Mr. Smith was being puffed.

In due course the meal—an absolutely successful "little dinner"—came to its conclusion, and with the snaring of Lady Chesham's eye by Mrs. Orlitson's eye the women rose and commenced their trail of egress.

Mr. Smith, being nearest the door, gripped and held the handle.

Lady Chesham—Mrs. Percival—Miss Gunway—Honora—Katherine.

But Honora's lace scarf caught in a carved oak knob, thus causing her to turn round when nobody expected her to do anything but follow the feminine file.

She turned—turned in time to see Mrs. Orlitson's left lid droop stealthily over her left grey eye, and she gave one swift glance up into Mr. Arnold Smith's impassive face!

Without doubt Katherine must have been quite intimately friendly with her late husband's chum!

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CHAPTER XIX

Dr. Sphait felt the pulse of a rural patient, prodded his side, raised his eyelids and inspected his tongue, and taking more pains over the treatment of this simple rustic ailment than he would have done in the days before Dr. Amberton set up and remained in Seedlingditch.

Yes, it was a fact that at last another red lamp had been able to retain its vivid glow, and another brass plate continued in a condition of brilliant, prosperous polish.

Without a doubt Dr. Sphait's popularity was on the wane.

Nothing concrete had occurred to bring about this regrettable state of affairs, but it was just that another man had at last snared the public confidence, and though many old patients retained their former allegiance, most new-comers seemed to call in Dr. Amberton instead of Dr. Sphait.

Probably it was merely one of those inevitable revolutions of fortune's roulette wheel which ordains that after a long prosperous run on the red, a punter must suffer an adverse run on the black.

Some people—look-ahead, cautious people—are able to store enough during the "run on the red" for the "run on the black" not to matter.

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But such wasn't the case with Dr. Morgan T. B. Sphait.

The big scarlet motor had cost a lot of money to keep up, and though patients had been plentiful, Dr. Sphait was only a poor man's doctor, and the poor man's doctor doesn't find it easy to hoard.

Besides, lately the general practitioner had been obsessed by one idea. He wanted to be a specialist—a nerve and rheumatism specialist—for, according to his theory, neural and rheumatic disorders were absolutely synonymous.

There was a certain treatment—he had been years trying to find it out, and now every detail was perfected—but not one which could be practised on poor patients.

It was a treatment requiring a Harley Street house, a footman, and a wealthy *clientèle*.

But the step from the obscurity of a small country surgery to the dignified roominess of a Harley Street consulting-room is a long one, and Morgan Sphait possessed neither means nor influence necessary for its accomplishment.

When the rural patient was dismissed with a bottle of tonic and a few cheery remarks—Dr. Sphait still bravely maintained his cheeriness—the large, ruddy, British looking man uttered a profound "draughty" sigh which stirred the window curtains, and threw himself on the shabby American-cloth covered sofa.

He was tired, mentally and physically, and for the time being felt more inclined to rest his big body, big

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limbs, and big brain than to pay hospitable attentions to his guest—a young newly qualified M. D., who had come to pay a brief visit with a view to possible partnership, and was now lolling discontentedly in the dining-room and thinking about the London trains.

For some moments Dr. Sphait lay perfectly still, with his very bright, quickly moving blue eyes half shut.

He was thinking hard his thoughts—wondering if it would be possible to raise money or find a philanthropist capable of setting him up in Harley Street.

He *must* get out of Seedlingditch.

A sort of hot fury suddenly raged within him, and for a moment he felt he could never be placid or cheery again.

Rural tongues, rural chests, rural pulses, rural coughs, rural babies, rural stomachs, rural corpses! There had been nothing to break the monotony, not even one stimulating incident except—except——

A smile slowly found place beneath Dr. Sphait's moustache. He was just remembering that one incident which a little over a year ago had given food for speculative reflection.

What a smart woman she was!—that white-faced Mrs. Orlitson, who, after her husband's funeral, had passed away from Seedlingditch and its surroundings!

"There was a mystery about that business," mused the M. D., who had just reached that age when people begin to find diversion in reminiscence. "I often think if I hadn't chanced to look through that blind—there

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couldn't have been any real reason though!—no motive—but it was odd! A smart woman!—by Jove! what a waist!"

Dr. Sphait half laughed, made a sensuous, sibilant sound with his lips, and stretched out one large fair-haired hand to grasp the weekly roll of papers sent by a grateful maiden-lady patient whose poodle he had—contrary to all laws of professional etiquette—once consented to attend.

If Miss Cantoose would only express her undying gratitude by means other than *Lyra's Journal*, *Heldon's Home Dressmaker*, *Maid's Friend*, and *Woman's Sphere*, the poodle's plaster would have been more worth while, and—ah! but actually to-day's bundle included the *Loose Spear!*

Dr. Sphait swept *Lyra*, *Heldon*, &c., with all their enclosures—such chaste blouse, combination, pinafore, and petticoat patterns!—to the ground and languidly opened the penny pages of *Loose Spear*.

He wasn't much interested in sickly "pars" of rewritten copy concerning individuals who, by reason of their money, vice, clothes, talents, ancestors, hobbies, divorces, parties, diamonds, etc., had attained the distinction of being "People"—anyhow from a harassed editor's point of view. But he would just glance through—it might be diverting to glance through.

Dr. Sphait skipped gentle anecdotes concerning royalty, skimmed details to do with duchesses, and was just turning on to the "Topical Tailoring" column when a name caught and held his hurrying blue eye.

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"*MRS. ORLITSON*"——

"Orlitson" was the name engraved on a very simple head-stone in Seedlingditch churchyard—it wasn't a common name—how strange, when he had just been remembering——

Dr. Sphait shifted his attitude from one of indolence to alertness, and began to read:

"The weekly 'at homes' given by Mrs. Roger Orlitson at his luxurious flat in Holstein Mansions are becoming conspicuously successful functions, where pretty women, smart men, celebrities, and first-rate musicians are always to be found. Mrs. Orlitson, who has only dawned on the social horizon this season, can trace her own ancestors far back into French and English history, and her late husband's family was no less distinguished. Little more than a year ago Mrs. Orlitson was left a widow under sudden and distressing circumstances, with no means except a comparatively small sum paid by the firm with which her husband's life had been insured—and to-day she is a substantially wealthy woman! A successful roulette system skilfully played at Monte Carlo more than doubled Mrs. Orlitson's capital, after which liberal investments in those magic 'Grey Rubbers'—which have made more than a few fortunes within the last ten months—completed this charming lady's good luck. Mrs. Orlitson is very slight, with a perfect figure, pale *spirituelle* face, and quantities of exquisite hair of the exact shade immortalised by Burne-Jones. She is a prominent member of the new Serpentine Club, and is beginning

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to take her place among the best-dressed women in London."

Dr. Sphait laid aside the paper and stood up.

His ruddy face was quite apoplectically red, and he tugged at his collar as though the linen edge had become too high and too tight.

That house in Harley Street and the wealthy *clientèle* seemed to have suddenly grown into tangible possibilities.

The man possessing some possible secret connected with a penniless, unknown woman doesn't hold an asset that is in the least marketable; but when the woman suddenly becomes rich and influential—well, that's among the other matters!

Dr. Sphait crossed the hall and entered the dining-room, where the newly-made M.D. was disconsolately smoking a foul pipe.

"Ah! Chamberton, just the man I wanted!" cried the general practitioner who yearned to become a specialist. "Would you take entire control here for a week or so?" he continued. "I want to run up to town, and—and—if matters arrange themselves satisfactorily, there is a chance I may remain in London. If so, no doubt we could come to some arrangements? Eh?"

"Certainly we could—delighted!" responded the M. D.

"Thanks, old chap."

"You—er—you've had some good luck, I hope, Sphait?"

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"Well—er—I can't be sure yet awhile—but there seems a chance, a possible chance!"

"I'm jolly glad to hear it!"

"Thanks, old fellow!"

And Dr. Sphait bellowed cheerily. It was quite a long time since he had bellowed, but now Hope seemed standing in the distance beckoning with a thin white finger, the sound came easily again.

"Wonder if any man's fortune has ever yet been made by looking round the side of a blind and seeing what he wasn't meant to see!" mused the Seedlingditch practitioner who had brought home Roger Orlitson's dead body in his great red motor-car.

He chuckled to himself—then began mentally planning all fittings and furnishings for the Harley Street consulting-room.

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CHAPTER XX

Mrs. Orlitson and Miss Vayne were attending a charity concert given in the picture gallery of a big house, and several nods, smiles, and fan-salutes from people of importance evidenced the fact that the widow with the perfect waist was getting on very nicely indeed, not only with men—Mrs. Orlitson troubled very little about the door-opening sex, except from a social point of view—but also with women—which, in some circumstances, is far more important.

When Mrs. Orlitson first began to be seen about, a very general impression prevailed that a widow, a young widow, a red-haired widow, a loquacious widow, and an unknown widow mightn't be quite "quite"; but Katherine's niceness to women—the right women—and indifference towards men soon caused her to be regarded as a really "ducky thing" whom it was decidedly worth while to know.

To-day Mrs. Orlitson was wearing her customary perfect black, with a huge *cloche* hat about which a black lace veil fell and draped in a truly desirable manner. Her red hair was at its best, and she looked much more than a little distinguished.

Honora wore grey, gave the impression of being legitimately beautiful, and had already suppressed four yawns during the roulades of a large new French *prima donna*.

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Half a syllable forced to do duty for twelve bars of music left her emotionally untouched.

She looked round—realised that women with hand-made complexions should avoid the new season's new colour of *framboise écrasée,* wondered why a French *prima donna* should look like a British typist in Sunday clothes—and finally noted that Katherine's black eight-guinea ostrich boa was lying on the next seat.

Was the boa placed on that seat by accident, or was——

The rest of Honora's mental question was answered before she asked—because, just as the French *prima donna* had finished the last "le" of *hirondelle* on some note quite outside the radius, Arnold Smith lounged up the red-baized gangway and dropped into the vacant seat.

Honora then understood the boa's placement, for during the three weeks which had passed since Mrs. Orlitson's little *dix dîner,* her late husband's chum was often dropping into vacant seats.

Honora returned his friendly bow bowed across Katherine's lap, and tried not to hear fragments of the widow's greeting; but as Mrs. Orlitson disliked whispering in public places this effort was not wholly successful.

"——be in time——always late—everything——— particularly wanted you———cure you———kept seat——"

There was no doubt that the dead husband's chum

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was being nagged by the dead husband's widow—which was distinctly odd!

A prodigy violin child was now beginning to play an intricate something by a composer whose name ended with "ski," and during a cadenza of somewhat smeary harmonies Honora vaguely reviewed the situation, which was not one she could wholly or even partially understand.

Arnold Smith was gradually becoming Mrs. Orlitson's unenthusiastic *attaché*, in spite of the facts that Katherine frequently treated him with an impatience bordering on incivility, and that to-day's *sotto voce* reprimand was not by any means the first which the chum had suffered from the widow's agile tongue.

Yet in spite of this Katherine seemed to like the witty, easy-going *attaché*, whose genial temper never showed remote signs of being ruffled more than any of the other buzzing flies who hovered round, obviously desirous of sharing her matrimonial and financial jampot.

She skilfully foisted him on all her new friends and acquaintances, till it came about that Katherine and Honora rarely attended any function not graced by the presence of Mr. Smith.

Honora couldn't understand it in the very least, till suddenly an idea—born of a friendly smile from Arnold, which Katherine leaned back not to intercept—suggested itself.

Was it possible that Katherine was laying deep plans? Was she sorry for Honora because Bernard

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had gone away, and was she deftly putting forward Arnold Smith by way of a possible consolation? Was this why Arnold Smith dined with frequent *à-trois* intimacy at Holstein Mansions?—why seats were kept for him?—why Katherine appeared desirous of licking him into shape as regards unpunctuality and general dilatoriness of method?

If Mrs. Orlitson *did* match-make, her methods would without doubt be of the most subtle and skilful variety. She would never make the egregious mistake of throwing one person at another person's head, and it would be quite possible for the two victims to find themselves cremated by Hymen's torch before they even guessed that Mrs. Orlitson was engineering the whole business.

The prodigy was now performing a very unnecessary *pizzicato* passage, and with every quick curt note it seemed to Honora as though a quick curt stab was being thrust into her heart—for no agony could be more poignant than the idea that Bernard Benstead's sister was trying to foist her on to another man.

When the concert was over and Mrs. Orlitson had made two or three engagements *en route* from the picture gallery to the side entrance near the stables—which was the only spot of egress and ingress which Lord Redhaven thought worth while to put at the disposal of charity—she suggested that Mr. Smith should go home with them instead of standing them unsatisfactory tea and cakes at two shillings per head.

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Mr. Smith agreed without any display of appreciation—he never appeared to appreciate Mrs. Orlitson's favours, which was possibly the reason they were so persistently bestowed—and a few minutes later they were gliding Parkwards on silent wheels.

"You look awfully glum, Honora dear, but it suits you, doesn't it, Mr. Smith? Only really good-looking people can be glum effectively. What upset you?—the *prima donna's* celestial efforts, or the prodigy's squeaks, or Lady Grenmayo's hat?—or was it Mrs. Corr-Linto's theft? Just fancy, Mr. Smith"—here Mrs. Orlitson turned her volubility on to the back seat—"Mrs. Corr-Linto is the hon. treasurer person, so I sent her my cheque—made out to herself—for two seats at the last moment, saying I'd come early and ask for my tickets at the improvised bureau place. We came early, but there was no asking for tickets, because Mrs. Corr-Linto, beaming, purring, and cooing, met us in the hall, waved aside the question of tickets in a manner suggesting that we were too supreme for such conventionalities—personally conducted us to a couple of seats—chatted a moment, then beamed, purred, and cooed off again. Obvious! See the point? Why, of course, in returning her unsold tickets Mrs. Corr-Linto gives up mine instead of my cheque, and that cheque, made out to Mrs. Corr-Linto, purchases two guinea's worth of gloves or veils! One of the cutest dodges I've seen! Daddy B. V. would just revel in it, wouldn't he? Mr. Smith, *do* make some comment or remark!"

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Mr. Smith stroked his upper lip, as though he missed a moustache which had once been there.

"*You* make so many, Mrs. Orlitson, that there's very little time for other orators to get their innings," he replied genially.

Katherine screwed up most of her features, then turned to Honora.

"Insolent person, isn't he?" she slurred out.

"I don't think so," was Honora's equable response. She knew Katherine's condemnation belonged to the same order as that of a fond father who alludes to his daughter as "an extravagant little devil"—it was the condemnation of cordiality; and with this new motion, which was now filling her mind, she had no intention of aiding and abetting any cordiality.

Arnold laughed.

"Miss Vayne is severe—she won't even acknowledge that I'm insolent," he said, with the dinner-party note of cynicism in his voice.

Honora flushed. She felt she was being made fun of in the most friendly way imaginable.

"Luxurious method of getting about this, isn't it?" was Arnold Smith's next remark, as the mute-wheeled car shot in and out of Piccadilly traffic with the beautiful grace of a sinuous dancer.

"Yes, isn't it?" answered Katherine, while a very intense expression shot into her light grey ineffective eyes. "When I used to take a 'penn'orth' of motor 'bus, I'd try to lean back and pretend I was spinning along in a little car like this. My heavens, how hard

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I used to pretend, and want, and yearn, and long! I don't think any woman ever yearned for life's luxuries so much before!"

For a moment this red-haired widow with the perfect waist seemed to have forgotten that she was addressing an audience of two people who should presumably have no place among the strange vicissitudes of her strange career. It was as though amidst the frivolities and flippancies of this comparatively new *vie de luxe* she suddenly came face to face with the past and all its strenuous mistakes and yearnings—as though a sort of superstitious influence demanded that she must verbally acknowledge her luck.

"Yes, I wanted it horribly," she went on, "and there were times at Seedlingditch"—here she half unconsciously addressed the man on the back seat—"when I wished so *hard*, that no power seemed left for anything except wishing! But I've got what I wanted, and if ever it were taken away—God only knows what would be the result, and——"

"But as it's never likely to be taken away, Mrs. Orlitson, I should think it would be better not to contemplate eventualities—silence and repression are always safe!" broke in Arnold Smith's quite easy, quite languid voice.

Katherine looked dazed for a second—like a person suddenly waking from the effects of gas after the extraction of a tooth—her eyes met the gentlemanly, genial eyes of the late Roger Orlitson's chum—a momentary wave of colour stole beneath the clear skin of

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her white face—then, for once, she actually refrained from talking during the space of two whole moments—and when those moments were ended the mute brougham came to a mute halt in front of Holstein Mansions.

But this time Mrs. Orlitson was quite normal again.

"We'll have tea in the 'bood'!" she cried, leading the way into that rampantly inartistic apartment into which not one single *intime* had ever been permitted to penetrate.

But Mr. Arnold Smith formed an exception to this rule—in fact, one very huge violently upholstered cane lounge chair was already his established resting place, and now, from her new point of view, Honora saw in these privileges merely concessions made for her sake.

"I'm going to unhat, so you two can babble banalities while I'm away!" said Katherine when they reached the only room in the flat which was truly and vulgarly comfortable. "If the tea comes, Hon, do plop in a lump of sugar to draw the blackness out—my nerves demand black tea. Ta-ta!"

But this concluding salutation was unnecessary, because no sooner had Mrs. Orlitson reached her decorously furnished bedroom than Honora knocked at and opened the door.

"What! Deserted the poor Smith person!" was Katherine's ejaculation.

Honora shut the door, crossed the room, and gripped a chair back.

"Katherine, I—I want to ask you something," she

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began, with a whole gamut of feminine emotions in her voice.

"All right, my beloved, but don't speak in those legitimate drama tones! What is it?"

"Wh—why—er—what is this about Mr. Smith?"

Katherine's silver comb inset with turquoises fell with a clatter on to the silver pin tray, while her light grey eyes looked startled and full of a sudden fear.

"What about him? How?" she queried sharply, and without a slur or rumble in her tones. It was the sharpness, clearness, and tenseness of alarm.

"You—you are encouraging him here for my sake—you—you want to—to make him marry me, and I—I prefer to go back to Sussex at once!" and as Honora made her accusation she looked particularly young and particularly forlorn.

Katherine stared at her for some consecutive moments; then, as the startled fear filtered away from her grey eyes, she broke into prolonged peals of absolutely uncheckable laughter.

"My dear beloved young dark-eyed donkey, you've got a mare's nest big enough to hold hundreds of foals into your head!" she cried. "It's really funny, truly, deliciously, joyously funny! Oh! oh! you entertaining little imbecile! You *don't* know *how* imbecile you are!"

Honora looked less and less forlorn during this sentence, and when Mrs. Orlitson once more broke into peals of laughter, an answering smile crept to the corners of her own mouth.

"I've made a mistake then?—you really *aren't* try-

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ing to get me off—to foist me on to Mr. Smith?" she murmured.

Katherine's peals merged into ripples, and the ripples only interspersed her remarks.

"No, I really am not," she answered, "and I truly assure you, my very dear foolish one, that I should not be in the least elated if you were foisted on to Arnold Smith. In fact, to tell you the exact truth, *I should be distinctly annoyed!* Now don't ask any questions, but run away and be brotherly to Arnold Smith, and keep your heart nice and empty for the time when Berr comes back—for he *will* come back, as surely as my age isn't what I say it is! Now kiss me—and bolt!"

And Honora, whose heart had greatly depreciated in weight since the beginning of the conversation, did both, and on returning to "the bood," found Mr. Arnold Smith still in the lounge chair—the back of which was turned toward the door—with his feet hoisted on an inlaid ebony stool and *a pipe in his mouth!*

He heard the door open without turning round.

"I'm making myself beautifully *chez moi*, you see, Kits——" he began, when Honora made a very honourable rustle to reveal her personality. "Pardon, Miss Vayne—thought it was Mrs. Orlitson," he broke off, rising to his feet and immediately becoming normal and conventional. "Perhaps it's a good let-off for me that it wasn't Mrs. Orlitson, because though we all got to the 'Kits,' 'Roger,' and 'Arnold' state of intimacy when poor Orlitson was alive, it's quite possible his

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widow wouldn't permit such familiarities, and—oh! er —my pipe—I'm awfully, frantically sorry——"

"Please don't put it out for me," interposed Honora good humouredly. "I only glanced at it because I was wondering if Katherine——"

"Yes, what's that about Katherine?" broke in a low, slurring voice from the doorway. Mrs. Orlitson had got rid of the large hat and the large veil, and now came towards them with her thin chin stuck forward and her hair puffed out in all its red magnificence.

Honora explained.

"Oh, yes, I don't mind pipes in here—in fact, to be really truthful for once, I revel in them! But they *must* be foul, pungent things that make people with Early Victorian throats choke and gurgle! I adore foul pipes, so as Honora doesn't mind, Mr. Smith, and as you were a chum of poor Roger's, you may always bring out your clays and shag when you are admitted into the seclusion of this apartment! The only thing I request is that you won't let the pipe hang down one side of your mouth and make you look like a rubber-faced man out of a cracker! Ha! ha-ha-ha-ha-ha——"

And with an indefinite number of little gurgles Mrs. Orlitson threw herself on a much bepillowed and becushioned lounge, after pushing Honora into a big rush chair fashioned like a shell.

Presently tea came in, and Honora couldn't help observing with what Sultan-like indolence Arnold Smith retained his domestic lolling attitude while Katherine

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made the requisite sandwich of milk and cream with tea in the middle.

But Mrs. Orlitson appeared to demand nothing of her late husband's chum, and actually waited on him with that fussily maternal solicitude which is displayed by comparatively passionless women towards stray cats, bed-ridden cooks, paralysed husbands, and other dependent creatures who never argue, never pry, never warn, and never nag.

During tea Arnold Smith lay back in the huge chair, and as his plump, soft white hands hovered over the sandwiches and cakes to finally select the largest and most succulent morsels, a flowing stream of intensely humorous and witty anecdotes left his lips.

Most good stories were related as being absolute facts, thus giving evidence of the man's supreme fictional ability.

Katherine kept up one long serialised gurgle of amusement, while for the time Honora forgot her own low spirits.

The late Roger Orlitson's chum was really a most entertaining person!

"You're like a man in a fairy tale I used to read in my *première jeunesse*," said Katherine when Arnold ceased speaking in order to drink strong tea and cream with feminine relish. "His name was Timothy, and he told such enthralling stories that the court engaged him to amuse their king when he was dying of melancholia—and he talked, and talked, and talked, till the king got well and bestowed on him the grand order of

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the Speaking Eagle, and proclaimed that from henceforth he was to be known as 'Talking Tim.' You are *just* like him, so I shall drop '*Mr. Smith*' and call you '*Tim*'!"

"Right! Then may I drop '*Mrs. Orlitson*' and return to '*Kits*'? Roger gave me permission, you remember?"

"Yes, yes—of course I remember, and I wouldn't for the world withdraw any of my poor boy's concessions, so—so—from this time forward it's 'Tim' and 'Kits'! Much more convenient, eh, my big-eyed Honora?"

"Ever so much," responded Honora, who was beginning to wonder a good many things—among them how, if such a contingency arose, Katherine would like to change the effective name of "*Orlitson*" for the ineffective name of "*Smith*."

"Miss Vayne's approbation settles the matter then," said "Tim," as he rose heavily from the big chair, uttering a ponderous sigh, as though the exertion of getting up had somewhat overtaxed his strength.

"Must you be going?" asked Katherine.

"Yes, I've got an appointment with a man at the club for 5.30."

"Have you? Poor man! D'you know the time now?"

"I could find out if I looked at my watch—oh! no I couldn't. I broke the mainspring last night——"

"Well, look at my clock, and you'll see it's already seven minutes to *six!*" At this point acidity entered

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Katherine's voice, and the maternal look in her light grey eyes had departed.

"By Jove! So it is! What a confounded nuisance Lawson is, always making appointments at awkward times! Oh, well, if I take a taximeter I shan't be more than half an hour late. *Au revoir*, Miss Vayne; *au revoir*, Kits—see you to-night somewhere, I suppose—good-bye!" and without hurrying any more than if he had been thirty minutes early for an appointment instead of thirty minutes late, Arnold Smith sauntered out of the glaring boudoir, and a few moments afterwards out of the gravely furnished flat.

"The man's a fool!" was Katherine's verdict.

"I can't agree with you," responded Honora, as the door opened and Mrs. Orlitson's rigid footman entered the room.

"A gentleman wishes to see you, madame," he announced.

"Does he? Where is he?"

"In the drawing-room, madame."

"Oh! And his name?"

Hendry thrust forward a salver—on the salver was a visiting card, and on the visiting card was engrossed a name and an address:

DR. MORGAN B. SPHAIT

CONNER HOUSE,
SEEDLINGDITCH

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CHAPTER XXI

It is not easy for a pale woman to turn pale; therefore she usually takes refuge in turning yellowy-green under the stress of any particular emotion—and such was the high-art shade which spread over Mrs. Orlitson's face as she took the visiting card from the silver salver.

Three full seconds passed; then she spoke clearly and not quickly.

"Tell Dr. Sphait I will be with him in a moment."

The footman retired, and Katherine still remained looking at the visiting card, till, on glancing up, she found enquiry in Honora's eyes.

"Oh, dear, it quite 'gave me a turn,' as the servants say!" she cried, when the normal pallor had returned to her face and the slurring indistinctness to her voice. "Just fancy, the big fat pink doctor wh—who saw my poor Roger—*afterwards*, you know! It's a bad shock to be suddenly brought face to face with tragic chunks of one's past, isn't it? I wonder what he's come for —what he wants! I must go and see, and hustle him off as soon as possible, then scramble into clothes."

"Don't let him distress you," said Honora, as they left the room together. She instinctively felt that her red-haired friend was in the midst of emotional moments.

Katherine squeezed her arm; then when Honora had passed down the passage leading to her own room, Mrs.

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Orlitson gave her thin shoulders a curious, resolute jerk, bit her salved lips to intensify their redness, stuck out her thin chin, and walked forward with special movements tending to increase the rustling propensities of silk underskirts.

She opened the drawing-room door, entered, and then held out her hand with welcoming cordiality.

Just for a second Dr. Sphait seemed ill at ease—as though oppressed by the country cut of his garments, the refinement of Mrs. Orlitson's furniture, and the expensiveness of Mrs. Orlitson's clothes.

But immediately afterwards the man's large personality and self-assurance got the better of this oppression.

"How nice of you to look me up after all this time!" began Katherine, smiling her quick, insincere smile right up into his face.

Dr. Sphait retained her hand a second, and let his eyes stray to the perfection of her waist, which was twice as perfect now that eight-guinea corsets replaced the former seven shillings and eleven-pence halfpenny variety.

"I was up in town, saw your name and address in one of the society papers, and ventured to call and see how you were," replied the general practitioner in his cheeriest of cheery bedside voices.

"That was *really* nice of you! Sit down, Dr. Sphait, and tell me all your news."

Dr. Sphait selected a large armless chair, and sat down.

"I've very little news to tell, Mrs. Orlitson; so little

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happens in Seedlingditch, as perhaps you will remember."

"I hardly do remember, because, excepting Seedlingditch's doctor, I've almost forgotten everything about Seedlingditch!"

"You *want* to forget, perhaps, Mrs. Orlitson?" Dr. Sphait was examining a tray of dull Russian enamel as he put the query.

"Yes, it is always better to forget the shocks and sadness of life, isn't it? And about yourself. Are you still curing everyone for hundreds of miles all round the country?"

"No, I regret to say that someone else is curing them now—at least, of course, I insist they are being killed, not cured! Ha! ha!"

"Of *course* they're being killed! But I'm sorry to hear that, though I don't suppose it matters much to you——"

"Ah! but it does!—that's where you are wrong, Mrs. Orlitson, and that's why I am so anxious to leave Seedlingditch."

"Leave Seedlingditch!" It wasn't often that Katherine was guilty of banal parrot-like repetiton, but just then there seemed nothing else to say.

"Yes, I want to set up as a Harley Street specialist —a neural and rheumatic specialist!"

"Do you really? Well, that's a splendid notion, and I wish you bewildering success! I'll have nerves and enlarged joints every day of the week! Ha! ha! ha-ha-ha-ha——"

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"Ha! ha! That's kind of you, Mrs. Orlitson, for though I hope there won't be any need for you to pay me professional visits, I am glad to hear your patronage will be extended to a poor struggler. I am depending on your help, Mrs. Orlitson!"

The last seven words were uttered slowly and without emphasis or expression, but as he spoke Dr. Sphait fixed two not large but very clear and very frank blue eyes on the red-haired widow's face.

"I'm afraid you'll find me a very poor reed, but any little thing I can do——"

"You can do a great deal, Mrs. Orlitson. I require capital to start this enterprise, I require influence and recommendation to keep me floated when once it is started, and it is to you—to the rich lady who, by her brilliant powers of resource, has made a comparatively small insurance compensation into a large fortune—that I venture to apply. You will help me, Mrs. Orlitson, I know."

"*Why?*"

That one word fell sharply, clearly, and in its utterance was a note of challenge.

Dr. Sphait coughed, glanced half commiseratingly at the red-haired woman with the perfect waist, then answered in sauve, woolly tones that were rarely heard in Seedlingditch.

"Because of your kind heart, Mrs. Orlitson—*do* let it rest at your kind heart!" he answered.

"I do not wish it to rest at my kind heart—my heart isn't kind!"

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"Isn't it?—then I must venture to trade on other emotions. Do you remember, Mrs. Orlitson, that on the night after I had brought home your husband's body in the afternoon it was agreed that I should send you a composing draught?"

"I think I remember—yes."

"You were alone in the house, you may recollect, *quite alone* in the house with the dead body of your husband—a most terrible ordeal for a delicately strung woman!"

"Yes—well?"

"Well, Mrs. Orlitson, instead of sending that draught I came back with it myself, but before I knocked at the door I was seized by an impulse of curiosity."

"How—wh——"

"I went up to the little parlour window, which you may remember was situated at the side of the cottage, and looked—ahem! I looked, Mrs. Orlitson, through a slit in the blind, a slit through which it was possible *to see the whole room and everyone in it!*"

There was a silence—quite an appreciable silence, after which the red-haired widow rose.

"Come into my little boudoir, Dr. Sphait—we can talk there more quietly and without fear of interruption," she said.

And Morgan B. Sphait, with a smile on his face—rather a fatuous smile—followed her across the hall.

. . . . .

Meanwhile, Honora, in her own room at the further

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end of the curved corridor, was doing her own hair while she thought her own thoughts.

They were complicated thoughts—sometimes turning in this direction, sometimes in that, without ever reaching any definite resting-place.

Every day the conviction grew upon her that candid Katherine Orlitson, who made so many ingenuous boasts concerning her own frankness, was developed in mystery as well as flowing veils.

But the secret, whatever it might be, was entirely personal and unshared by Bernard. Honora felt absolutely sure that Bernard knew nothing except what he had been told by his candid sister, and she felt equally sure that Arnold Smith was very certainly mixed up with Katherine Orlitson's past.

But how was he mixed up? He had certainly met and become intimate with the Orlitsons during their honeymoon, but that would hardly account for—some things!

Katherine had vaguely alluded to their re-meeting at the Carlton, and Arnold had vaguely alluded to their remeeting at the Savoy; but, whichever statement might have been accurate this casual re-meeting hardly accounted for such quickly revived intimacy.

In her own mind Honora felt sure that the red-haired widow and her dead husband's chum had seen each other since the bygone honeymoon trip, and before the presumed accidental meeting at a fashionable restaurant.

But if they *had* seen each other, where was it, and when was it?

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At this moment Honora suddenly remembered Mrs. Burham, who had been sent away by one of her papers to write up a new Cairo Hotel, and who, on arriving at "The Regal," had immediately developed symptoms of scarlet fever, and was still *hors de combat* in an isolated flat over a stable, while the three marriageable daughters who didn't marry, carried on the "par" business as satisfactorily as possible during their indefatigable mother's peeling process.

Yes, Honora remembered Mrs. Burham, and Mrs. Burham's nearly libellous statement to the effect that at a secluded country hotel she had seen——

At this juncture Honora pulled her thoughts together with a jerk, and stamped one foot with the sharpness of self-annoyance.

"What right have I to probe and pry into another woman's secrets?" she asked of her own reflection in the glass. "Should I like my miserable story dragged out of its hiding place and commented upon and wondered about? If Katherine Orlitson is a woman with a story, so am I! We are two women with two stories, and it's only fair to one to leave the other alone. I won't wonder any more—I'll just accept her as she accepts me!" And having made this resolution she dressed the Empire curls of her effective hair and slipped into a black dinner frock—a dinner frock free from all those extra adjuncts and adornments which betray the amount of interest a woman feels in life.

Five minutes later Honora was dressed and passing from her room just as Mrs. Orlitson, followed by a large

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man, left the boudoir and stood in the square lounge hall talking about London air compared with country air, till she caught sight of Honora.

"Hon! Come here!" she cried.

Honora advanced slowly, looking nearly beautiful in her undecorated black gown.

"I want to introduce Dr. Morgan D.—no, 'B.,' isn't it?—Sphait to you—*the* cleverest doctor in Big Britain, who is very wisely going to abandon general practitionering in order to set up as a Harley Street specialist for rheumatism and nerves! He's *so* clever that I quite begin to yearn to suffer and be cured!"

Honora bowed, Dr. Sphait bowed, and the red-haired widow, whose light eyes were glittering, continued a running fire of smiles.

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CHAPTER XXII

After inspecting the chicken farm during one of her bi-weekly visits, Honora realised that even though Mary Tryke and her husband were getting through quite the regulation amount of cheating and sharp practice, financial conditions were improved.

Profits were increasing and expenditure decreasing, a satisfactory state of things which would undoubtedly be reversed directly the proprietress came back to take up the reins of management.

"Everything seems to be going very well, Tryke," commented Honora, as armies of young giddy chicks fluttered and strutted on every side.

"Aye, miss, better than they done for over a twelvemonth," was Tryke's tactless response.

Honora smiled with the genuine amusement of a woman who has never learned the "progressive" and lucrative art of conceit.

"And you attribute that to my absence, Tryke?" she queried.

"Well, miss, there's something in the old saying about too many cooks a-spoiling the broth, though of course it wouldn't be for me to say——"

"No, no, of course it wouldn't. Well, I shan't be back just yet, so the farm has got a few more weeks of prosperity before it. Good-bye, Mary; good-bye, Tryke, and remember to keep on sending the eggs every

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day to Mrs. Orlitson—good-bye!" And as Honora stepped into the square, lumbering station fly, which had been ordered to fetch her in time for the 5.20 train, the red Sussex rooster flew on to a high wall and crowed his usual crow.

"*Cock-a-doodle-do!*" Was this a discourteous method of speeding a parting proprietress or—— "*Cock-a-doodle-doo-oo-oo-oO!*"—or was it an omen of some coming triumph—some imminent piece of good luck?

Honora raised her voice and responded, the rooster flapped his wings, and to the encouraging sound of "*Cock-a-doodle-doo,*" the square vehicle turned the corner and left the farm behind.

Having ordered the fly in time to catch the 4.10 train, Honora was enabled to catch the 5.20 without any undue rush and hustling, and as they steamed out of Transley station a certain indefinable breeze of elation ruffled the stagnant surface of her emotions.

Deerbuck Chicken Farm and its outlying woods—to-day dressed in new thin mantles of arsenic green—had brought back such a poignant rush of memories that it almost seemed to Honora as if Bernard Benstead's kisses must still be lingering hot and impassioned upon her lips.

More than half a year had elapsed since their brief loving and swift parting, and sometimes Honora had gladly believed that the picture of a large man was really growing dim and faint in the gallery of her mental memories.

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There were days when she could hardly recall the uninteresting semi-fairness and semi-darkness of his hair, and when the careless roughness of his voice no longer sounded in her ears.

And those were comfortable, satisfactory days, when she would smile coquetry into a dinner neighbour's eyes or leave some favoured partner with a tremendous belief in his own attractions.

But on this late afternoon there was no restful slurrings over and forgetfulness.

Memory had come with one of those foaming, roaring, cataract-like rushes which always do return, and return, and return when love has been the real thing.

No man or woman who has been through the *real* thing can ever finally escape. They are only out on ticket-of-leave, liable to be recalled into passion's thraldom at any time or place.

Immaculate husbands, attractive wives, social successes, financial successes, artistic successes, creditable children can satisfactorily induce the belief that "*it's all forgotten now*"—but the sight of one wood filled with close-growing trees, the perfume of one deeply red rose with curving velvet leaves—the sound of one commonplace three-four time melody, instantly sweeps away that comfortable fallacy of forgetfulness.

They said that Love would die when Hope was gone,
And Love mourn'd long and sorrowed after Hope;
At last she sought out Memory, and they trod
The same old paths where Love had walked with Hope,
And Memory fed the soul of Love with tears.

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Honora's vivid lips moved, and she pressed her body closer to the cushioned arm of the carriage, as though half unconsciously pretending that the railway company's solid piece of upholstery was the breast of her absent lover.

Never had Bernard seemed so near as he was to-day, not even when his arms were actually holding her in a passionate man's passionate clasp—for sometimes—in love—memory can be more real than reality!

When Honora alighted at the terminus and took a cab straight to Holstein Mansions, her cheeks were glowing with that vivid flush which had the power of making her beautiful, and not even the subdued bedroom, with its decorous furniture, could shut off the picture of riotous, gay green woods where love had come to life among the trees.

Manette—Mrs. Orlitson's admirable maid, who continued most perseveringly with her French accent—was standing before the wardrobe taking out a cream velvet Empire gown weighted round the trained skirt with heavy embroideries.

"Not that, Manette—I'll wear black—we're dining alone," said Honora, who unconsciously resented actualities which forced her back from ephemeral realms of memory.

"Pardon, mademoiselle, but madame desire me to offer her much love, and to say some important frumps arrive to dinner, and would you, to please her, wear ze velvet?" replied Manette, whose eyes were clear, innocent, and pellucid, and those of a lying child.

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"Oh, of course—yes—if Mrs. Orlitson wishes it," answered Honora impatiently.

"And madame also ask if to help her by kindness it would be possible for you to enter the drawing-room some twenty minute early as she have head of the ache and desire to repose up to the final moment."

"I am sorry Mrs. Orlitson's head aches—yes, I will get ready at once."

Manette still looked pellucidly innocent, and after Honora's travelling costume was removed, commenced to dress the dark Empire curls with special elaboration.

By 7.30 Miss Vayne was attired in a costume which was quite regrettably becoming, since "frumps" would be the only witnesses of her attractions, and the vivid flush of beauty which memory and environment had laid upon her cheeks still remained.

She strolled slowly and turned the curve of the corridor with that unconscious arrogance of movement which is often the outcome of expensive and becoming clothes. Women mayn't mean to think about their clothes, but they do, every one of them, and at every crisis in life.

Hendry, who was crossing the hall, opened the drawing-room door for her to enter—she entered—the door was reclosed—she stepped with the same arrogant grace across the thick unobservable carpet—she glanced towards the second drawing-room—she stood quite, quite still—she refrained from uttering one word—she was drawn forward into an engulfing embrace—and the

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dreariness of life had once more ended in a large man's arms!

The red Sussex rooster *had* crowed in triumph for a coming happiness, and the elation of memory had, instead, been but the magnetic sparks cast forward by coming events!

"I was horribly angry with you, but I had to come back!" said Bernard, almost carelessly, when a kiss that was not in the least careless came to its long drawn-out end.

Honora stepped back and looked at him.

Hitherto they had been two people clad respectively in serge suits, cotton frocks, and straw hats, but now they felt the need of getting to know each other all over again.

Evening dress suits some men and it suited Bernard Benstead, by emphasising his largeness and brown fair cleanliness. His indented chin protruded effectively above a stiff collar and white tie.

And Honora was likewise a partially new acquaintance, with the rich cream-tinted bareness of her bosom, the proudness of her untrammelled throat, and the aspect of civilised convention which new white twenty-five-button-length kid gloves can always be relied upon to impart.

"Well, what do we think of each other?" enquired Bernard, after a few seconds of mutual scrutiny.

"I think you quite up to the average of ordinary well-groomed men," replied Honora.

"And I think you a commendable example of the

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properly-clothed, properly-mannered, civilised young Englishwomen!" retorted Berr with boyish rudeness in his voice.

Then they laughed again, and somehow drifted towards a recess and back into each other's arms.

"You behaved like an absolute caddess and an absolute coward on the occasion of our last unconventional interview, and I don't know why the—well, 'devil' will do as we're alone—I've come back to you!" said Bernard, touching her warm shoulder with his smooth chin.

Honora didn't answer. A luxurious, hot shame was causing her body and limbs and pulses to throb.

"*D'you* know why I've come back?"

A mute moment ensued; then came the surrender of all Honora Vayne's caution.

"*Life, however short, is made shorter by waste of time.*"

Honora remembered those words—at school she had once been ordered to write them out a hundred times by way of punishment for some incompleted task, and now they came back with a dangerous significance which the excellent head-mistress had never intended.

Her life shouldn't be shortened by any more waste of time—she had wasted enough already when—

> Liebe ward der Welt von Gott verlieben
> Um zu Gott die Seele zu erzieben.

She would learn Rückert's congenial lesson—*she* would begin training her soul at once—*she* would make the very most of life and the very most of love, risking

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every consequence and stifling every cry of an inconveniently moral conscience.

"*Do* you know why I've come back to you—I hardly do myself!" The question was repeated just at the psychological moment, when she was ready to answer.

"Yes, Bernard, I know—it was only because I couldn't get on without you any longer!"

"Oh! my *dear! Oh!* my dear! Oh! my *darling!*" Bernard didn't like to let go of his British reserve, but at that moment he was forced to give it leave of absence.

He called her all the endearing names that might be included in a plumber's love-letter to a housemaid, he kissed her strongly, but fondly and innocently, he only held her hand sometimes, only looked at her at others, and finally smoothed her hair in the most tender but devastating manner imaginable. (No matter what may be the intricacies of modern puffed, French-combed, ruffled *coiffures*, the man really in love will continue to *smooth* just as his early eighteenth-century grandfather found it quite convenient to smooth his early eighteenth-century grandmother's plastered locks. Pure, honourable affection must find vent in *smoothing*, no matter what obstacles in the way of fringe nets, pads, combs, etc., may be encountered!)

"And as you really couldn't do without me, we're going to be always together," he went on. "In point of fact, I believe it's quite immoral for us to be apart, because if each is incomplete without the other, it's sort of foisting incomplete halves on society! We'll be a

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perfect whole, my Honora—you and I—myself and *my wife.*"

"I—I told you I did not intend to marry," she answered weakly.

"Yes, I know you told me a great many very foolish, very hysterical, very new-woman sort of things. I listened then and went away—now I'll still listen, but only when we are married. A man is bound to let his wife talk nonsense, and I daresay I shall quite enjoy it then, my darling, my darling, my—ah! Kits"—as Mrs. Orlitson entered the room—"I've got my own way—Honora is going to get over her anti-matrimonial scruples and marry me!"

Katherine made one rush at Honora, and left kisses on a cheek still vivid with the pressure of her brother's lips.

"I knew it, because ever since you wrote you were coming back I've been *willing* that it should come off—sort of mental insistence, you know. All day long I've been saying '*Hon shall have Berr—Hon shall have Berr*' over and over again, till the magnetism of my thought made her say 'Yes.' So you can just make me a nice present, *mon frère,* because my hard-willings got you your wife! Hurray! hurrah! hoor——"

"*Mr. Arnold Smith!*" broke in Hendry's admirable voice.

Mrs. Orlitson swirled round and greeted the last member of their *parti carée.*

"Actually not late!" she cried. "At least, of course, you think you're late, because I told you half

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an hour too early! Now, when you've finished shaking Honora's hand, let me introduce a new person to you. This is Berr—my brother, Bernard Benstead, whom I've just willed Honora into promising to marry—Mr. Arnold Smith—poor Roger's chum, who was so jolly when we all met abroad—commonly known in Holstein Mansions as 'Tim the Talker.'"

The two men shook hands, and at once showed signs of liking each other.

"I told Honora I was expecting some influential frumps, and made her put on one of her best frocks—if I hadn't, Berr, you'd have come back to find her quite mediocre and dowdy in black! Now let's adjourn and eat! Come along—no arm-giving—come along, Honora, come along, Berr, come along, Tim!"

And as Mrs. Orlitson said "*Come along, Tim,*" she smiled up into the eyes of her late husband's chum with the very friendliest expression in her own—and the evening which followed was a distinct success.

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CHAPTER XXIII

"NINETY—eighty-two," called out the weary voice of the Serpentine Club's billiard marker, as Mrs. Orlitson chalked her cue with the most cautious accuracy.

It would be interesting to hear an explanation as to why women billiard players chalk their cues on every desirable and undesirable occasion—a person with a taste for statistics had made an indisputable discovery that the amount of chalk supplied to a woman's club boasting of four billiard tables is exactly one-third in advance of the quantity supplied to a man's club with the same number.

So far no solution to this problem is forthcoming, but a theory that the act of cue-chalking is an excellent medium for displaying diamond rings seems as though it may have some bearing on the subject.

When Mrs. Orlitson had thoroughly blued the tip of her cue—the Serpentine billiard players always used blue chalk, except one member, who had been seen to produce a pale pink variety—she made a thin white bridge, half-closed her light grey eyes, stuck out her chin, and aimed to pot the red, with the result that a very creditable all-round cannon was achieved.

Bravely regardless of her fluke, she rechalked the cue and scooped the red into a top pocket.

The opponent began to get restless and complained

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of a headache—one of those tiring, neuralgic headaches which interfere with the eyesight. She absolutely couldn't see *a thing* that afternoon—which is often the way of feminine players who stick at eighty!

Mrs. Orlitson reviewed the angles and drew mental lines between the balls and the pockets, after which she somehow succeeded in getting in off the red, with her opponent's ball left temptingly over a pocket.

"I must try for the cannon—I *hope* you won't go down!" murmured Katherine, as she made a really painstaking effort and finished the game by potting the white.

"One hundred—eighty-two," cried the weary marker, putting up rests and spiders and half-butts, without the use of which implements the Serpentine champions very rarely achieved a break of five.

"I *am* sorry," gurgled Mrs. Orlitson to the defeated opponent, who was feeling for her purse. "When one tries for those long cannons the wrong thing so *often* comes off! Enjoyed the game *ever* so much—you must have your revenge to-morrow—good-bye!"

Out of the swinging doors, across the big hall, and into the drawing-room Mrs. Orlitson trailed her thin, soft, rustling black skirts, pausing a second before steering towards a small tea-drinking group in the corner—a group composed of Honora, Bernard, and Lady Chesham.

"I've won!" she announced in tones of candid pleasure. "I'm *so* glad, because I *do* love beating people I hate, and I *do* hate Baroness Monche more than any

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person I know. Why and wherefore she's called 'Baroness' it's difficult to determine, but that doesn't matter. Have you actually got tea without waiting half an hour?"

"Yes, only twenty-five minutes," replied Bernard, who was there because Honora was there.

"Have you just come, Evelyn?" enquired Katherine, after ordering a whisky and soda.

"Yes, I looked in to ring Charles up—he's so silly—always insisting that I shall ring him up every afternoon, so that he shall know I'm not engaged in any serious mischief," responded Lady Chesham with a small twittering laugh that hardly accorded with her waist measurement.

Katherine purred sympathetically as she sat down.

"Sir Charles is a nice, resolute ogre, a gentlemanly, white-skinned Othello!" she said, casting one swift glance and eye-droop towards Honora. "But you're very wise to indulge him, Eve, because a man tortured by jealousy is a very pitiable creature. Are you going to be jealous and ogre-like, Berr, when you and Honora are married?"

Bernard's mouth widened by a quarter of an inch.

"I shall have my own methods," he answered grimly.

"And what are those? Ill-usage, starvation, imprisonment?"

"No—*neglect*."

Katherine uttered a shrill little squeak.

"Oh! the tragic vanity of the male human thing who believes neglect to be the supremest punishment we can

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inflict! Why, neglect is the most convenient thing in the world!"

"Oh, no, it isn't," replied Bernard, with calm assertiveness. "No woman likes being neglected, even by a man she loathes, for neglect is a testament to waning attractions, and women insist on being attractive even if they aren't."

"What you say is absolutely true," broke in Honora, "because every single feminine emotion is based on vanity. One's loves, hates, hopes, fears, virtues, and vices all spring from vanity!"

"Precisely."

"Do you mean, then, my dear Miss Vayne, that vanity has caused you to become engaged to Mr. Benstead?" It was Lady Chesham who asked this question, revealing a glimpse of her middle-class soul by the British matron primness of her voice.

"Mainly, I think, I suppose I was pleased at his wanting to marry me instead of wanting to marry other women, so I said 'Yes.'"

"Yes, and I only proposed for the sake of putting her on good terms with herself!"

"Don't listen to them, Eve—they're pulling our legs, or noses, or something. They think they're being very original, but they don't get beyond puerility. *A* everybody's *santé!*" And with this hybrid toast Mrs. Orlitson got rid of the whisky and soda—which had just been brought after twelve minutes' delay—while Bernard and Honora made the situation perfect for themselves by looking into each other's eyes.

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"It was *love*, wasn't it?" he whispered, passing the cold, butterless "hot buttered toast."

"Yes, it was love," she answered, taking mouldy cake instead.

"Six new members elected this week," remarked Lady Chesham, peering into the teapot.

"Isn't one of them a lady with artistic yearnings of sorts—a Mrs. Dobel—a pallid person without a chest?"

"Yes, she is literary. I've heard that half her husband's income goes in paying people to write, and publish, and buy, and read, and review, and dramatise her books."

"Poor thing!"

"Only last month he—no, is it *really* you? Welcome back!" And as Lady Chesham broke into italics Katherine saw a new shadow across the tea table, and felt the presence of a new substance behind her chair.

"Yes, I've come back—had a really dreadful martyrdom, but I'm quite safe and disinfected now," answered the thin jerky voice of a busy woman.

Bernard had by this time risen and put his chair at the new-comer's disposal.

"Yes, do sit down and talk to us—you'll get another chair, won't you, Mr. Benstead?—and—ah! of course you don't know my friend Mrs. Orlitson, do you? —you went away almost directly after she was made a member. Mrs. Orlitson—(Mrs. Burham)—Miss Vayne —Mr. Benstead."

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Mrs. Burham gave her head three friendly jerks, and sat down on a high chair next to Katherine.

For the fraction of an instant Mrs. Orlitson remained inert—like a slackened diabolo string awaiting its moment—then she turned towards the society paragraphist and stuck out her chin.

"Mrs. Burham, I'm awfully pleased to meet you—firstly, because I want to know *you*, and secondly, because I *do* want to vindicate my poor character. Lady Chesham told me that you saw my unfortunate double—pitiable soul!—under most suspicious circumstances at—at—Brighton or somewhere!"

Mrs. Burham laughed, just enough, but not too much!

"It wasn't Brighton—it was Langley Cross," she answered, darting both eyes round the big room as she spoke.

"Langley Cross? Where is that?—at least *I* ought to know, oughtn't I? Ha! ha-ha-ha!"

"Ha! ha! It's in Buryshire."

"*Is* it? Well then I'm afraid, Mrs. Burham, the world *must* hold another red-haired woman with an unhealthy complexion and scraggy collar bones!—such a pity! I *did* hope I was the only one!—because I've never heard of Langley Cross, and I've never been to Buryshire in my life! I wish we could find this Mrs.—Silk, wasn't it?——"

"Dylke!"

"Oh, yes, 'Dylke'—in order to clear my British-widow virtue! Ha! ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

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Mrs. Burham echoed the laughter in half-hearted jerks.

"And the male accompaniment?—*do* tell me exactly what he was like?"

Mrs. Burham, who by this time had thoroughly noted the costly perfection of Katherine's gown and the expensiveness of her rings, moved nearer. (This lady who clothed three marriageable daughters who didn't marry, on "pars," always moved nearer to the wearers of really expensive rings.)

"Well, it isn't easy to say exactly," she answered cheerfully.

"Was he anything like Sir Charles Chesham?"

"Not in the least."

"Anything like that miracle-worker, Dr. Sphait, who has just begun to specialise in Harley Street?—a perfect *disciple* of nerves and rheumatism—seems to have cured half London already—made a new woman of me!"

"I've never seen Dr. Sphait. You see, I only arrived back in England yesterday——"

"Yes, of course—after that dreadful scarlet fever! Has it left you rheumatic, by-the-by? I believe scarlet fever often does, doesn't it?"

"Yes, I'm sorry to say it does, because——"

"——because *you've* got it! Mrs. Burham, Dr. Sphait shall cure you! He absolutely *shall!* I'll tell him if he cures you without charge you'll puff him in your nice, clever glazed papers, and—let me see, what were we saying?—oh, yes, about——"

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"*Good heavens!*"

Evelyn Chesham, Honora, and Bernard were all busy discussing a new play at a new playhouse, so only Katherine heard Mrs. Burham's ejaculation.

"What an extraordinary thing! You know, Mrs. Orlitson, you were asking me to describe that man—Dylke—who was at Langley Cross Inn with your double——"

"Yes?—yes?"

"Well, I can *show* him to you! He is *there*—here—I recognise him at once—look! coming this way——"

Mrs. Orlitson looked, and a second later Arnold Smith was shaking her hand and heedlessly calling her "Kits," while once again the widow's effective pallor became tinged with green and yellow.

Mrs. Burham sat absolutely upright in an upright chair, and looked vacant.

"Would Mr. Smith like fresh tea? Well, he *had* rather a *penchant* for tea that was newly made!—no, not toast—scone for perference. No, he hadn't been to the Albanian *fête*—had promised to go, but forgot——"

"Mrs. Burham!"

"Yes, Mrs. Orlitson?"

Katherine stealthily sidled her chair further away from the tea-drinking circle, and Mrs. Burham—a woman whose income was largely earned by intuitions—followed suit.

"Why—why don't you start a paper of your own, Mrs. Burham? Everybody says how awfully clever

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you are at this hobby of yours—journalism. Surely there's room for another society paper?—not a *very* elaborate one that would want *too* much capital, of course, but just something smart and *chic!*"

"Oh, yes, there's room—plenty of room—and with my exceptional advantages I'd guarantee to make it pay."

"Then why don't you do it?"

"Because I haven't *sufficient capital*, Mrs. Orlitson."

"Yes, yes; but if someone else found that—if *I* found it?"

There was a pause. Mrs. Orlitson's light grey eyes met Mrs. Burham's steel blue eyes.

"Yes, suppose *I* found it, Mrs. Burham, and that though I remained actual proprietor, you drew a nice fat sum every week?—so long as we remained *friends* and *allies*, of course! It sounds a jolly idea, doesn't it?"

"It sounds a most fascinating idea, my dear Mrs. Orlitson, and if the *Worldly Woman*—that's the title I've always fancied—is started in the way you suggest, we must regard ourselves as staunch comrades and allies *for all time to come!*"

Katherine smiled delightfully, and held out her hand.

Mrs. Burham shook the hand.

"Agreed!" was their almost simultaneous utterance.

And the secret of Langley Cross was safe—but it meant a lot of money if the paper was to be glazed.

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CHAPTER XXIV

BERNARD—who was staying at a small hotel in Bond Street—reached Holstein Mansions one morning to find his sister sitting in "the bood" with a hard drawn expression on her face—a hint of the same expression that was there when she had washed the plates and dishes at the Seedlingditch cottage.

"Bernard," she said suddenly, "are you fond of me?"

Bernard sat down.

"I rather fancy I am—anyhow, I like your pluck," he answered good-humouredly.

"What pluck?" Kits voice was sharp.

"Oh! the way you lie about your ancestors and poor old Roger's ancestors, and the way you defy public opinion enough to give the impression that your own secure pinnacle of respectability makes it quite safe for you to be unconventional—yet always keep clear of boundary lines."

"My admirable Berr, you are as analytical as a woman! I thought Tim was the only man who ever analysed."

"Oh, no, I can run Smith very close when occasion requires. What a slack devil he is, to be sure!"

Katherine—who only yesterday had been verbally brutal to the said "slack devil" because of his forget-

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fulness in the respect of delivering messages—looked annoyed.

"I don't see he's any slacker than you are, my dear boy—besides he's got a temperament," she answered sharply.

"Has he? Well, he shouldn't have—men haven't any right to temperaments—they don't fit in with sport. But he's a decent sort, and possesses a perfect fund of unexpected energy. We played three rounds at Barnham yesterday, and though every caddie was engaged and it's a beastly rough course, Smith carried his clubs and won like a brick. His tiredness is of the variety that goes off when he wants to amuse himself!"

"*That* is spiteful—but you needn't be spiteful about Tim, because he doesn't admire Honora in the least."

"Doesn't he? Wise Tim! And d'you think he admires *you*, Kits?"

Mrs. Orlitson grew faintly flesh-coloured.

"I'm quite *sure* he doesn't," she replied with emphasis, "but because of his having known poor Roger and all that sort of thing, we get on well together."

"I see."

A pause.

"Berr!"

"Kits!"

"Are you well off? You've never really told me."

"Yes, I'm well off. Why?"

"*Quite* well off, I mean."

"Yes, I'm—don't gas this about—I hate talk and touts—I'm just about a millionaire!"

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"Oh! my *dear, big, clever, beautiful* brother!" (Mrs. Orlitson had now leapt on to the arm of the dear, big, clever, beautiful brother's chair, and was crushing his collar by the violent pressure of two thin white arms.)

"If I'd only known that before! A real millionaire! An honest or dishonest millionaire?"

"Quite a fairly honest millionaire."

"Any secret slaves or things?"

"Not a slave!"

"Tinned decompressed foods?"

"Not a tin!"

"Stolen diamonds?"

"Not a diamond!"

"Pork?"

"Not a pig!"

"Speculations?"

"Partly!"

"And what else? What is the beginning?"

"Rubber!"

"How nice and refined! Oh, won't Honora and I revel in mackintoshes, and hot water-bottles, and portable baths, and goloshes! Did you dig and find it yourself?"

"No, I more grew than dug—at least, I bought at a low price what other people had grown, and then developed the plantation!"

"How clever! You dear paternal thing! And does Honora know?"

"No, I don't think so. She has never sounded me

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as to my prospects. I suppose she sees I can afford clean collars and cabs."

"It's really very delightful to have a millionaire brother! I thought you must be extremely coiny when I saw how cheap your watch and stick were! It's only twenty-five-shilling-a-week clerks who have good watches and sticks. I *am* pleased, Berr!"

"Thanks, Kits. But you're such an affluent young person yourself that my dollars won't much affect the family prosperity."

"Oh! but that's just what they *will*—what they can! You want to make me a real handsome present, don't you, brother Berr—something that I can't afford to give myself?"

"Course I do, Carrots."

"Then will you run a paper called the *Worldly Woman* for me—a good paper with a liberally-paid woman-editor who guarantees to make the thing a paying concern? I've always longed to be the ruling spirit of a kind of society paper in which all one's best friends can be libelled under assumed names. Will you do it, Berr, *will* you?"

"Yes, my dear, if you want it, I will. It seems to me a d——d silly way of squandering cash, but if it pleases you, I'm willing, provided the *Wordly Woman* doesn't quite beggar Honora and myself. Worldly women aren't often very lenient to men's pockets."

"But *our Worldly Woman* shall be, I promise you. You're a dear thing, and now you can go if you want

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to very much—I can sort of feel your muscles breaking loose to run after Honora. If we came of a kissing stock I'd kiss you, but as we don't I'll slap your big, broad, chubby shoulders and let you go. Thanks, old boy, awfully."

"Not a bit, old girl—glad to be useful"—and with a cheerful, unmelodious whistle on his lips, Bernard swung out of the bead-curtained doorway and made his way to a very small room which had been recently fixed up as a temporary "bood" for Honora—because, according to Mrs. Orlitson, if two women living under the same roof desired to retain their friendly and affectionate relations, it was absolutely essential that they should have separate havens. Katherine averred that she and Honora would have come to active blows three weeks ago but for those two separate "boods," where each could sit and think how irritated she felt with the other.

Bernard knocked at the door, and Honora said "Come in," and the next moment a love-scene had begun.

But Honora's and Bernard's love-scenes were not quite like other people's love-scenes. They were more restrained, more passionate, more unexpected, and sometimes a whole hour would pass without touch of lips or touch of hands.

"Good-morning, Miss Vayne," was Bernard's greeting.

"Good-morning, Mr. Benstead," replied Honora, without looking up from a long letter which she was

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writing to Tryke concerning the purchase of a dozen Ancona hens.

Bernard smoothed the curve of her neck in passing—there was all a man's primeval patronage in the touch—then sat down on a low couch pushed up beside the writing-table, while Honora's pen continued its fast travelling over the pages.

"I came round to see *you*, you know," remarked Bernard, after half a page had been covered.

"Of course you did," responded Honora, who was wearing cream serge with very blue violets at her breast.

The pen continued its wayfaring, till suddenly—of course Honora had been waiting for this—the writer was forcibly induced to occupy a vacant portion of the low couch.

Bernard pressed her back against a cushion and looked at her—as he had looked when she had lain on a carpet of bronzing leaves—then he bent right over and kissed her cheek, which is about the most unsatisfactory of lover's caresses.

Honora smiled right up at him out of her bewildering eyes—which of late had grown full of a dozen new expressions—and after that look the love-scene really began.

"I wonder if I shall get really and heartily sick of kissing you," mused Bernard when they were both half breathless with passion.

"It's possible—but it's no good looking ahead," answered Honora dreamily.

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"On the contrary, it's a great deal of good to look ahead, when ahead I see you, my dear darling."

"Oh! but you mustn't—you mustn't—one never knows about the future, never wants to know about it—please, Bernard, *please* don't look ahead!" And in Honora's voice there was real fear.

Bernard laughed in the superior way of a man who feels lenient amusement at feminine upheavals—the sort of laugh suggesting that all women's emotions, from vexation concerning an ill-fitting gown to pangs of death-agony, have to do with hysteria.

"Do you know that in less than two months I shall be able to bully and domineer over you all day and all night if I like?" he said, giving her the faintest suspicion of a shake.

Honora's vivid flush momentarily deepened. In some ways she felt less completely at ease with her lover than formerly.

"Yes, and I shall be able to make you kiss me before breakfast—you always hate early-morning affection, don't you, darling?" he added.

"Yes, I can never be reckoned upon for amiability till lunch," responded Honora, trying to speak lightly.

"I used to be the same—the notion of kissing a woman before 5 P. M. was positively revolting to me, but now I find acute pleasure in kissing *you* before ten. That shows we were meant to marry—no man was ever intended to marry any woman except the one whom it was rapture to kiss before 10 A. M.—like this—and *this!*"

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A replete interval elapsed before Honora asked a very *ingénue* question—but she didn't ask it in an *ingénue* way. There was something like desperation in her voice.

"You are quite sure you love me very much, Bernard?"

His answer was beautiful—just the answer a woman must have wanted—for he threw back his large head and laughed.

Sure! was he sure? The doubt implied even by the question was worth long strong laughs.

Honora demanded no further response, and for a moment rested mute in the close holding of his arms.

Then she spoke again.

"I—I was thinking about you last night, Bernard——"

"Of course—that's your only legitimate occupation."

"No, no; listen—yes, I was thinking about you and your views on things. You—you are a man who troubles very little about what might be called conventional morality, aren't you, Berr." There was a curious lilt of pleading in her tones.

"I don't know—I used to be——"

"*Used*—to—be!"

"Yes, I think my gay-dog, daring notions have a bit gone to the wall since knowing, and being mildly fond of, you!"

He was rubbing the back of Honora's white and rather beautiful hand up and down his cheek as he spoke.

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"Do—do you mean that you have got more—more conventional in your ideas?"

"I suppose I do, darling. At one time it wouldn't have troubled me in the least to be cut off Mrs. Grundy's visiting list, but now, somehow—good Lord, I believe I'm growing *proper!* Grim, isn't it? I positively like the idea of wearing a frock coat and being married in church; I have a yearning towards silk hats; I relish the notion of your paying calls in new gloves and distributing exactly the legitimate quantity of my cards and your own; and I shouldn't wonder if I ended by cutting Lawrence Grant because of his *sub rosa* Fulham flat and its tenant, and by framing our marriage certificate. Yes, I'm sure I *shall* frame your marriage lines and place them in a conspicuous position on the dining-room walls! Terrible state of things, isn't it? And all your fault, my dear!"

Honora laughed quite hilariously, and during the rest of the morning talked more volubly than she had ever talked before—a new phase which Bernard found very enthralling.

But of course men who are quite in love—and not married to the centres of their devotion—find most new phases enthralling.

At last the love-scene, followed by a stroll through the park and lunch, was over, and Bernard had murmured *au revoirs* which would be required to last for over twenty-four hours in consequence of a business appointment in Liverpool that would keep him out of town till the following evening.

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Honora took her lover's last kiss, passed the "bood" where Katherine was smoking and drinking liqueur brandy mixed with Curaçoa, and went up to her own bedroom.

Immediately the door was closed the smiles and vivid flush which made her beautiful gave way to pallor and an expression of blank, relentless woman's despair—for the despair of a woman, a young life-loving woman, is more acute than any other.

"*End—by—cutting—Lawrence—Grant—because—of—his—sub—rosa—Fulham—flat—and — framing—our—marriage—certificate!*"

Honora repeated each word slowly and distinctly, as though she were paraphrasing the sentence.

"Our marriage certificate! Our—*marriage*—certificate! OUR MARRIAGE CERTIFICATE!"

And Bernard was getting proper!

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CHAPTER XXV

Mrs. Orlitson drained her cross-bred liqueur and lit another cigarette in the boisterous manner peculiar to *fumeuses* who have graduated from "the boards."

An ex-touring actress may doff gentle blasphemies, may lose her relish for port, may refrain from addressing new acquaintances as "dearie" and "old boy," and may even relinquish her taste for three-inch French heels and white furs, but nothing can teach her to smoke like a lady.

The ease with which a "cig." lolls out of one corner of her mouth, or is retained between her lips to jog up and down while she talks, betrays much to a beacon eye.

Mrs. Orlitson puffed a great many puffs, then leaned back with a sigh which revealed a mental condition bordering on satisfaction.

Bernard had just taken a considerable load off his sister's mind by confessing his momentary affluence and by promising to finance the *Worldly Woman;* for though roulette and "Grey Rubbers" had caused Mrs. Orlitson's golden dreams to be fulfilled, they did not provide unlimited capital for the setting up of a Harley Street physician, and for the capitalising of a glazed paper.

However, if Berr fixed up the paper Katherine could

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float the specialist—particularly as Dr. Morgan had begun to make and take quite a reassuring amount of money.

Everybody seemed to suddenly know of this nerve and rheumatism specialist, whose name was perpetually cropping up in the "pars" of six-penny weekly journals, who had cured Mrs. Orlitson of a hitherto unconfessed nerve-trouble from which she had suffered in secret for years, and she had already been the subject of several illustrated interviews.

Yes, Katherine congratulated herself that the Seedlingditch doctor who had looked through the blind wouldn't continue to be much of an incubus.

She had floated him expensively, boomed him royally, and luck—who, so far, had behaved very decently to this red-haired widow with a perfect waist—still seemed sticking close to her side by holding out strong helping-hands to the new specialist in Harley Street—for when the Seedlingditch practitioner was fully floated and independent, Mrs. Orlitson would be free from one firmly forged chain which linked the present to the past.

Katherine continued to puff, and was just about to mix another double liqueur when Hendry knocked—permission must always be gained before entering the vulgarly upholstered "bood."

"Come in."

Hendry approached.

"Dr. Sphait wishes to know if you could see him for a few moments, madame."

"Does he? Oh, very well—show him in here."

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"Very good, madame,"—and a moment later Dr. Sphait was shown in.

Mrs. Orlitson greeted him—even after Hendry had retired—with quite a middle-class display of ceremony, the sort of ceremony intended to draw very definite lines of division, and to show that *tête-à-tête* interviews must not be regarded as mediums for intimate discussion.

Even in private, blackmailed and blackmailer must not acknowledge their relations.

"Are you busy as usual, Dr. Sphait?" enquired Katherine with a primness of manner that was almost humorous.

"I am, Mrs. Orlitson."

The big specialist's voice was cheery as ever, but it was a superior order of cheeriness. The former and less subtle variety had been lain aside with country-cut clothes.

Katherine threw away her cigarette and gradually changed her lounging attitude to one which would have befitted a suburban housewife receiving the vicar's first call. Morgan D. Sphait should be admitted to no sort of intimacy, and Katherine knew that to establish safe dealings with this large, not well-bred man, barriers must never be momentarily relaxed.

"Will you have a liqueur?"

"Thank you—I will."

"Mixed?"

The ex-general practitioner evidently didn't know what she meant.

"No—er—no soda, thanks."

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Katherine was commendable and betrayed no hint of amusement as she poured out a Curaçoa.

Dr. Sphait did not consume the liqueur quite soundlessly.

"Now, Mrs. Orlitson," he began when the little glass was entirely empty, "I've come to ask your help in a rather delicate matter." Here he drew up his chair with a professional briskness which seemed to suggest the coming prolonged investigation of a patient's throat.

"What is that, Dr. Sphait?"

"Well, I believe that a notion which possibly may be deemed old-fashioned obtains in London as much, or even more, than it did at Seedlingditch."

"What is that notion?"

"That a medical man should be a married man."

"I see." (Could the voluble Mrs. Orlitson be responsible for these brief inexpressive rejoinders?)

"Therefore I believe it would be politic for me to marry."

"Very probably."

"And what do you advise, Mrs. Orlitson?"

"I advise you to follow your own inclinations."

"You do?"

He looked at her attractive red hair, at her attractive white face, and at her wonderfully perfect waist, and as he looked his bright blue eyes grew brighter.

"You advise me to follow my own inclinations, Mrs. Orlitson?"

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"Certainly."

"Then your advice shall be taken——" And before Katherine could get any grasp upon the situation, Dr. Sphait had leant forward, taken her two thin shoulders in the grip of his large hands, and was covering her white face with kisses that were half primitive, half brutal, and wholly unsatisfactory.

This was a very poignant moment, and Katherine knew it. If this huge, pink, cheery man felt his power not one second of her future would be safe. It was the sort of moment when a lion-tamer subdues the beast for all time to come or loses his own life.

Katherine would either get this large, pink human beast under subjection, or she would lose all that represented life to her.

She summoned together her forces.

"You cad, you underbred, incurable cad," she cried, pressing the knuckles of one thin white hand against each of his healthy cheeks till it was physically impossible for the caress to continue. Then directly she was free she rose and faced him. "You insolent, absolute outsider."

Dr. Sphait tried to look nonchalant.

"My dear Mrs. Orlitson, you quite misunderstood; nothing was further from my mind than insolence. Perhaps my appreciation of your charms may have caused me to put the cart before the horse—if so homely a simile may be applied. I ought to have made my proposal first, and waited for the rapture of an embrace to follow in due course."

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"What proposal?" Eyes and voice were both like steel.

"A proposal of marriage. I was going to ask if you will be my wife."

"Then let the matter stay where it is."

"You mean you would refuse me, Mrs. Orlitson?"

"Utterly and irrevocably!"

"And suppose I pressed the matter—*very close—very close indeed?*"

"You mean, Dr. Sphait, if, because you believe yourself to be in possession of some secret which would ruin my whole life, you made further efforts at blackmail, what would I do? That is what you mean." The huge man began to look less huge, and the medium-height woman's inches seemed to increase.

"I—I——"

"Yes, that is what you mean, and in reply I'll just tell you for the last time how matters stand. You looked through the blind, you made a certain discovery, but you have not the vaguest notion as to how much, or how little, that discovery is significant." The blue eyes were sparkling less now, and just once or twice the crinkled lids fluttered. Katherine knew that a random risky shaft had gone home. "In point of fact, it is very little significant, much, much less so than you would at all imagine by the fact that I am booming you and setting you up in a Harley Street practice for the purpose of securing your silence. But, Dr. Sphait, I will now tell you that I am not prepared to pay any further price for that silence. Your idea

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now is that, in addition to a house and practice, you will be able to annex a rich wife. Your idea is wrong, for sooner than concede another inch to your demand I am prepared for you to make public all you think you know."

"But I—I——"

"I'm sorry to talk so ceaselessly, but it's my way—when once I begin *nothing* stops me. Yes, Dr. Sphait, because on looking through a blind you saw me sitting on a sofa with my head leaning against a man's shoulder, when I was supposed to be absolutely alone in the house with my husband's dead body, you think your demands may be unlimited. But all that I intend to do I have done. I certainly prefer that people should *not* know I received a visit from a lover on the night of my husband's death, but if you wish to tell them you must do so! I don't think you'll be believed, and even if you were, people don't trouble too much about the bygones of a woman who is rich enough to be useful!" Roger Orlitson's widow shot a gimlet glance. Yes, all was well! Dust was being thrown right into very bright blue eyes. "I have made my own little position, and it wouldn't be easy for a new-comer like yourself to do me any harm."

"I have no wish——"

"One moment more, Dr. Sphait—I'm wound up and shan't run down till I've said all I want to say. Now there is just this little detail to mention. Once or twice lately when I have not found it convenient to grant you an interview, you have sent me very skilful little

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notes, one suggesting that for my sake it would be wise if a motor could be added to your possessions, and others putting matters even more clearly and forcibly. Those notes, Dr. Sphait, I keep locked and guarded as sacred treasures, because one day they would enable me to bring a beautiful action for blackmail against the writer—and blackmail damages aren't quite jolly, are they?" The lion-tamer's whip might slacken now, for this great crafty beast was nearly cowed! "So this is how we stand. To guard my silly, rather scandalous little secret from a small section of society, I have provided you with a ground floor suite in Harley Street, I have boomed you privately and through the press, and I have even pretended to be cured from an imaginary ailment. For another six months I am prepared to continue purchasing your silence, but after that time, Dr. Sphait, you must run alone, and if you care to tell the world that Mrs. Orlitson was carrying on an intrigue during her husband's lifetime, and that on the night of his death you saw the tail end of a love-scene through the blind, you must do so! Do so, by all means, while I occupy myself by bringing an action for blackmail! That is exactly how we stand!"

Breathlessly she had spoken, and breathlessly she stopped speaking.

Had she won? Was he gulled?

Dr. Morgan B. Sphait hitched down his snowy cuff and hitched up his glossy frock coat.

"Of *course*, Mrs. Orlitson, th-that is how we stand, and very satisfactorily for me! Pray don't let us dis-

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cuss such ugly subjects as—as blackmail—such a word can't enter our business relations! It—it is only that for another six months you will help and patronise a struggling specialist, and after that time he will be quite off your hands—*quite!* I—I am extremely sorry that you should have misunderstood me in any way, and I—I apologise for my little outburst of emotional admiration. Good-bye, Mrs. Orlitson—I have an appointment at four—good-bye!"

Katherine smiled graciously, and held out a thin hand.

"Good-bye, Dr. Sphait, and don't worry—— I'm only dangerous when I'm roused, and I'm sure you'll be a wise man and not rouse me again. We understand each other nicely now—see you to-night at the Grandages', I expect!"

And, cowed, the large pink beast, who would never again show his great carnivorous teeth or unsheath his hard curved claws, left the room, while the iron-willed, red-haired tamer stood with a triumphant smile on her lip-salved mouth and the metaphorical whip of victory in her hand.

The beast was tamed.

Katherine waited till heavy footsteps, a click, and a gentle vibration through the flat evidenced Dr. Sphait's departure.

Then she laughed as only Katherine Orlitson could laugh—low, throatily, with one burst of merriment, being only the continuation of the last re-stimulated by a fresh breath.

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"Poor big fool!" she cried, slurring every word.

"He may specialise on bodies, but, good Lord, he can't specialise on minds. How beautifully you took it in, my large country oaf! How gloriously Katherine's experiment succeeded. Bravo, Carrots! Katherine, you're a cute, venturesome devil, my girl! *You* didn't know but that the large pink thing suspected the *truth* —yet you bluffed it out, you coined the fiction of an intrigue, you hid *facts* by thrusting weapons of *fiction* into his hands. And all this time the pink oaf hadn't known concretely what he suspected himself, while poor Katherine had been paying to guard a secret that was absolutely safe! A lover! An intrigue! As if Katherine would waste her time and energies on either! Bravo Kits! Bravo, Carrots! Your're safe, old lady, from the pink oaf's attacks, and Mrs. Burham is quite wise enough to be lulled into forgetfulness by the *Worldly Woman.* Lucky Kits! Cunning Kits!—the most decorous red-haired widow in one corner of society!"

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CHAPTER XXVI

Mrs. Orlitson had enjoyed her solitary verbal outburst, and was just deliberating as to how the interval between then and dinner should be spent, when Hendry entered to ask if Manette might speak to madame for a moment.

Katherine gave the permission, and the presumably French maid came in.

"Please, madame, I to ask come if I am desired to do the packing for Mademoiselle Vayne?" she enquired.

"Packing! What do you mean?" snapped Mrs. Orlitson.

"I mean that now mademoiselle put the clothes into her trunk as for departure——"

"Nonsense, Manette, you are dreaming—Miss Vayne can't be packing!"

Manette only shrugged her shoulders with a well acquired jerk as Mrs. Orlitson swished her black rustling skirts out of the room, down past the curve of the corridor, and up to Honora's door.

She knocked.

"Yes? Who is it?"

"It is me—*I*, I mean——"

"Oh—a——"

"Let me in, Hon!"

A pause—a click—then the door was opened and

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Katherine found herself face to face with an Honora who was not in the least beautiful.

Her skin looked dull and livid, her mouth was strained and set unattractively, her enchanting Empire curls were crushed, and even her bewildering eyes seemed uneffective.

"Manette came to me with some nonsense about your packing, and asked if she could help you! What does she mean, dear?" was Mrs. Orlitson's direct attack as she pushed her way into the room, which seemed strewn with chaos and clothes.

"She probably means what is true—that I am packing to go away at once," answered Honora, not in the least dramatically.

"Have you gone mad, my dear?"

"No, I don't think so—I almost wish I had—it would be so much, much easier—I shouldn't be responsible for the wrong things I wanted to do if I were mad."

"I see—very logical. And what are the wrong things you want to do?"

"I want to marry Bernard and commit perjury—oh! Katherine, be sorry for me—I—I don't know what to do!"

And hopelessly Honora sank down upon an ottoman piled high with garments waiting to be packed.

Katherine took her right hand, held it very closely, sat down by her side, and at last knew she was justified in believing the proprietress of Upper Deerbuck Chicken Farm to be a girl with a story.

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"Perhaps, poor old dear, if you tell me what's wrong I may be able to suggest what's best to do," she said in a brisk, matter-of-fact way that acted like an astringent upon Honora's weakened emotions.

"Yes, I must tell you, but I can't tell—tell Bernard."

"Of course you can't, dearie. When it comes to telling things, men are quite outside the scheme. To begin with, why are you packing, and why are you wanting to leave me?"

"Because I must be gone before Bernard returns to-morrow. We must never see each other again—never!"

"But, you silly old goose, you're going to marry each other. Poor Berr had hard enough work to wring a promise from you, so surely you aren't going to be a little sneak and play him false?"

"I can't marry Bernard, Katherine—I can't because *I'm already married!*"

"My stars! Good Lord!"

Doubtless Mrs. Orlitson would have known how to be a great deal more emphatic, but these two commonplace exclamations did all that was required of them just for the moment.

She had always believed in the existence of "a story," but she hadn't imagined anything so convulsing as the existence of a husband.

"I can't believe you are a married woman—your eyes are too—too *innocent!*" she suddenly blurted out.

Honora's beautiful flush appeared for one transitory moment.

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"Th-there is no reason why my eyes should not look innocent—my marriage was—is—only a legal tie!" she answered nervously.

"What! Nothing——"

"Nothing—ever!"

"Then—why? What was the point of the whole business? When was it? What does it all mean?"

"It means that when my father died and left me a very few hundreds, we were living in Scotland. We had been there about five months, but had only become really intimate with one man. I turned to this one man in my trouble and incompetency—he helped me, arranged everything, and finally said it would make matters so much easier if I would be his wife, and that he had been in love with me for five months. At that time I had never cared for anybody, so I consented, feeling it would be better to have someone whose *duty* it was to look after me. I was so very lonely, and loneliness is dreadful, Katherine—dreadful!"

"Poor old dear! I know! Oh, God! *don't* I know!" —and the hands of two undemonstrative women clung closer together.

"Well, we were married one morning by licence, and directly the ceremony was over my—my husband received a cablegram. Urgent business called him to Germany—it was necessary for him to start that very hour, and it would be a week before he came home. Twenty minutes later he caught a train, while I went back to the hotel to await his return."

"And he never did return, did he? *Beast!*"

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"Oh, yes, I believe he returned, but not till after I had gone to England!"

"But why did you go? What had happened?"

"I went because two hours after his departure a man came to see me—a man of the very lower middle classes—the father of young daughters and young—*sons*. He had heard some rumours of the marriage, and came to warn me—to tell me terrible things, to put tragic, gruesome proofs in my hands concerning the man I had married. To avoid publicity he had never prosecuted the *beast*—but now he left it for me to do as I wished. The poor shamed man went away, and twelve hours later. I had started for England, leaving behind me a note saying that if ever *he* attempted to seek me out the whole truth about everything should be made known, and he should suffer the relentless punishment which is meted out to *beasts!*"

"Poor, dear, dear old girlie! and what did you do then?"

"I went back to being Honora Vayne, bought the chicken farm and lived there as you found me, and now I've—I've been nearly committing bigamy!"

Katherine screwed up her white face and looked puzzled, while her thin fingers unconsciously began to massage Honora's hand.

After a few minutes she spoke—almost sheepishly.

"I don't believe it matters—I would risk it if I were you. It isn't as if Berr were a sort of twentieth century god of rigid morality. I don't believe he'd mind—really."

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"That's what I thought, Katherine—*indeed* that's what I thought, and that's why I promised in the end. But to-day I've found out—things are different. Bernard has been telling me that he is growing to love the proprieties, th-that *he—will want—to frame—our—marriage—certificate!* He *would* care now, Katherine—he *would*—and I—can't do it——"

"Berr's a d——d fool!"

This did Mrs. Orlitson a lot of good, and while Honora's dark crushed curls were buried in a chaos of clothes—poor girl with the story! her sobs were very young in their intensity!—the red-haired widow thought with extreme rapidity thoughts that were slurred and hurried like her words.

A recollection suddenly came to her.

"He had a beard, hadn't he?"

Honora broke through her sobs to be surprised.

"Yes—how did you know?"

"Always felt sure your story was mixed up with a beard—you mentioned beards once, and by the way you spoke of the beastly thing I knew you'd been kissed by one and found it horrid! Poor dear!"

Honora sobbed again.

"What was he like, darling, this bearded beast?"

Honora rose from the ottoman.

"I've got his portrait, taken with father on the lawn. I didn't throw it away because father was there too. W-would you like to see it?" she said drearily.

"Of *course*—I *should!*" Katherine spoke with double italics, and already stuck out her thin chin in antici-

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pation of gratified curiosity. She felt very curious about this "beast."

Honora dragged a shabby desk out of a wardrobe, and unlocked it, and took out a photograph that was twice cabinet size.

"This is my husband—this is Stanford Golt!" she said with a shudder.

Mrs. Orlitson took the picture, looked at it, then without any premonitory warnings, slipped quite quietly and quite gracefully on the thick, comforting carpet!

She was—after the manner of most heroines in most "popular" stories—in a dead faint!—her second faint!

It was unexpected.

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CHAPTER XXVII

But Mrs. Orlitson wasn't a woman inclined to waste many of life's valuable moments in unconsciousness.

From her marigold hair to her impudent feet she was crammed with vitality, so before she had been one whole minute in the "dead faint," that vitality got the upper hand again.

"Don't be scared, dear," she said—just a little weakly this time. "I don't often indulge in gr-graceful, effective faints, but, oh, Honora! that likeness——"

"What?—his? Stanford's? what is——"

"No, no, not that—I mean the older man sitting in the chair——"

"What, father?"

"Yes—oh, my dear, if you *knew* how exactly his face is like the face of—of somebody who played a painfully poignant part in my life! Don't ask me about it now, dear—I'll tell you some other time." Possibly Mrs. Orlitson's fictional and imaginative powers were not in their best working order just at the moment! "Of course I can see now the chin is different, and th-there is no scar—but the likeness was startling at first! Now, I'm quite fit and frisky again, so do let me examine that other one of that villain whose existence will probably make Berr put a bullet through his brain! We Bensteads are rather prone to find refuge

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in bullets when the outlook is *too* impossible. What a —a—well, it's not altogether a bad-looking face, is it?"

Honora shivered.

"Don't! Now it—it seems to me almost *pestilential!*" she murmured.

"Of course, you nice, pure-minded darling, that's just what it should seem! I quite understand. It is a ghastly, miserable business, but there is only one thing certain—you and Berr mustn't part!"

"Katherine!" And with this exclamation Honora dropped to the floor a bottle of smelling salts which a few moments previously had been resting on Mrs. Orlitson's vivid upper lip.

"Yes, dearie, I am Katherine right enough, and Bernard Benstead's sister, and I know Bernard's temperament, and I realise what would happen if Bernard's life was wrecked, and I am going to stop those happenings. I'm not going to have my brother commit suicide just because of one girl's half-affected, superstitious, conventional idea of morality."

"Katherine, you don't know what you are saying!" This was an utterly feeble remark, but Honora felt weak, feeble, will-less, and vacillating.

"Many thanks, my dear, but I've not forgotten my lines. No prompt required! I know well what I am saying, and, Honora Vayne, I know that you are—you are a *coward*, a heartless, contemptible, despicable coward!"

Honora's face became dyed red, then blanched white.

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A coward! Yes, she always had been a coward! It was part of her nature.

She was a coward when her father died, and when, instead of bravely taking her life into her own hands, she let it slip into the hands of Stanford Golt. She was a coward when, instead of confronting a nauseous man with his nauseous story, she took refuge in flight. She was a coward over eight months ago when she had said "Good-night" to Bernard—and shut the door. She was a coward when, goaded on by the yearning, unfed passion of her heart, she finally promised to be his wife instead of making a full, sad confession, and she was a coward now when she failed in strength to carry out a resolve!

"And it isn't your goodness that makes you want to run away," continued Katherine's breathless, slurring voice, "it's only that you're afraid of what the consequences would be if Berr ever should learn the truth. You pretend to yourself, my dear girl, that it's the promptings of morality and conscience which cause you to be now occupied in packing your box. But that pretence won't go down—morality has got absolutely nothing to do with it. It's only fear and cowardice!"

"Katherine, you are unjust, and cruelly unjust. I did mean to be what you call brave, and risk possible imprisonment for bigamy and everything else, until Bernard spoke to-day. I truly believed him to be a man without any cramped, conventional code of honour—one of those independent men who look almost

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reverently on the sins of women who sin for love—but this morning I knew that these ideas were all wrong. Bernard, of course, might find some woman who pleased him, and make her his mistress; but the woman he *loves* —and he does, he does love me!—must be his wife! No, no, I must not do it—for—for every reason it would be terrible!"

"Terrible!" Katherine's throaty voice was insolently contemptuous. "I suppose you mean it would be terrible if some crinkled up red thing with irrepressible lungs grew up to find itself without a paternal surname! What rubbish! Probably the red thing never would find out—millions of 'em never do—and even if it did, it could keep its mamma's romantic little secret to itself. My dear, it's no good your getting freezy, and freezing, and writhing, and restless, just because I face you with your own quite human thoughts. To my mind, illegitimate children are often a jolly sight more attractive than wedlock's unoriginal product. Naturally they're more spontaneous and more electric. They owe their very existence to spontaneity and electricity. They *have* to *be.* Nobody wants them, but they are like beautiful young Judas trees, so strong with nature's lovely vitality and passion, and freshness, and impulse, that they'll actually force their way through fences and walls if they mean to grow. Wedlock's kids are there because they were meant and expected to be there. Sort of fundamental physical laws demand their arrival, but nine times out of ten they are conceived and born without enthusiasm, spontaneity,

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impulse, ardour, or anything else. I'm sure half the rat-like-mouthed best-Sunday-frocked, uncharitable, cheese-parey, church-decorating women who infest the middle classes are only the result of an unenthusiastic wedlock! And the vile, smug, frock-coated, psalm-singing——"

"Katherine, Katherine, this hasn't anything to do with it," interrupted Honora piteously.

"Yes it *has*—everything; you can't deny you were thinking of possible red-crinkled-up things, can you? Of course, you can't! Well, don't worry about those any more, or if you do, look among the lines of our brilliant society and stage beauties, and see if those whose aristocratic or even royal papas do not share surnames with their mammas, aren't a hundred per cent. more beautiful, witty, accomplished, and gracious than the daughters of commandment-keeping mammas! Of course they are, so don't upset yourself about the red-crinkled-up things any more, and be a decent, plucky girl. Make poor old Berr happy, as you promised, and don't force him to put a bullet through his really satisfactory Benstead brain! Do evil, Honora—if making a man happy can be reckoned as evil—that good may come of it!"

By this time Honora was crying hopelessly and drearily, just letting the tears drip off her beautiful lashes on to the bosom of her gown, without making any attempt to check the cascade.

Every moment she felt Katherine Orlitson's strength more and more dominating her weakness, and the con-

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tinuous, slurry, throaty flow of words seemed to act like a narcotic upon her own failing powers of decision.

A blouse she had been folding and refolding for the last ten minutes fell limply to the ground—a first actual sign of surrender.

And Mrs. Orlitson's verbal geyser wasn't by any means yet exhausted—a fresh immersion of boiling, seething, bubbling words streamed from between her reddened lips.

It was as though the whole powers of her thin strong body and her clear, resourceful mind were to be expended in the endeavour to make Honora Golt commit bigamy!

"Your marriage was arranged to come off in a month—it must be in a fortnight instead—and, as you know, Berr has been begging for things to be hustled, so there will be no difficulty. It shall be a quiet wedding, and afterwards, my dear, life will go on rose-coloured wheels, and you'll see the world through oiled glasses—the other way, I mean—*you* know! Nobody knows of your former marriage, this Golt beast wouldn't dare to betray anything because publicity and penal servitude wouldn't make his future career strikingly luxurious or successful, so you and Berr will be absolutely safe in your conjugal bliss! You must swear, Honora, you must swear now by something which is sacred to you, that plans shall remain unaltered, except that you and Berr marry a fortnight earlier than arranged."

"Katherine, I ca——"

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Katherine seized her wrists and gripped her with extraordinary strength.

"Go down on your knees—*swear* it—I can't have my dear old Berr—brother shoot himself because of you or any other girl with fine eyes! Swear it, Honora!"

The will and the wrists both relaxed their remaining counter-efforts.

Honora's knees were pressing into the soft, spongy, expensive carpet, and Honora's resistance was now like a newly planted tree that had been subjected to the outrage of a hurricane.

"Swear it, my dear old girl. Say after me—'*I swear not to be a coward*'——"

"Oh! Katherine——"

"Go on, dearie—'*I swear not to be a coward*'——"

"I—swear—not—to — be — a — coward —— (Oh, Katherine——!)——"

"And I swear to go through the form of marriage with Bernard Benstead in a fortnight's time. (Go on, darling!)"

"And I—I—swear—— (Oh, Kath——)"

"Go on, Honora!"

"——I swear to go through the form of marriage with Bernard Benstead in a fortnight's time——"

"So help me——"

"So help me——*God!*" And involuntarily the last great word fell unprompted from her lips.

Katherine bent swiftly and kissed her, then before Honora had risen from her knees this red-haired widow whose will-power had never yet betrayed its trust,

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swished her black, beautiful skirts from the room, down the corridor, and into the restful seclusion of the vulgarly furnished "bood."

But to-day there was no seclusion, for the "bood" was already occupied by a long, languid figure, sensuously reclining in a huge wicker chair that was like half a bath.

It was Arnold Smith, who smiled without changing his attitude or putting down his paper as Mrs. Orlitson entered.

"Oh, I'm glad you're here—I wanted somebody—I've been through a desperate time—positive nerve-racker," panted Katherine, whose face suddenly looked so white and thin that sidelights seemed to reveal the uncovered skull beneath the powdered skin.

"What's up, little woman?"

Katherine dashed the paper from his hand and dashed herself across his indolent knees.

"You *shall* think about me—you *must* comfort me—you *must* pet me—I've done so much—I'm *so* tired——" she wailed, dropping her effective red head right into the hollow of his shoulder.

"Poor little girl! Dear, plucky little pal!"

And for once Arnold Smith exerted himself sufficiently to hold a thin woman with a perfect waist closely and comfortingly in his arms, while with delightful tenderness he kissed the paleness of her cheeks and the redness of her mouth!

"Dear little pal! Nice little plucked 'un!"

Katherine lay back very contentedly.

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"You aren't a bad old boy, and I'm not sure that you are as good as a sixteen-grain phenactin powder!" she murmured.

The late Roger Orlitson's chum laughed quietly, and continued caressing the widow's thin cheek.

"We're all doing it, aren't we?" she whispered a moment later.

"Doing what, little pal?"

"Why doing evil that good may come of it. It's the best way—the only way!"

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CHAPTER XXVIII

Mrs. Orlitson's "set" was not in the least surprised to hear that the wedding of Mrs. Orlitson's brother would take place a fortnight earlier than was originally intended because—as Mrs. Orlitson said—there was just a chance that "poor globe-trotting Berr" might be summoned abroad any minute to give a brief personal inspection to one of those enterprises which had achieved the desirable result of making him a millionaire.

And the "set" felt as little interest as it felt surprise, because neither Mrs. Orlitson's brother nor Mrs. Orlitson's friend had done anything to cause comment.

Certainly Miss Vayne was a striking-looking girl—a beautiful girl when she troubled to smile or blush—and certainly Bernard Benstead could be a desperately attractive man. But as Miss Vayne had never tried to be beautiful or blushing for anyone but Mr. Benstead, and as Mr. Benstead had never tried to be attractive for anyone but Miss Vayne, the "set" scarcely found them worth while.

Men who had been snubbed voted Honora "provincial and poultry," and women who had been overlooked decided that Bernard was "stodgy." From the very first day that Mrs. Orlitson's brother appeared upon the scenes, his subjection to Mrs. Orlitson's friend had been as much a *fait accompli* as her glad acceptance of

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this subjection—and when two people are like that it's unreasonable to expect any set to feel interested in their doings!

In fact, when a radiant mid-season sun rose one morning to make London glad for Honora's marriage day, scarcely anyone remembered that at eleven o'clock two people would be legally transformed into one person by licence at a registrar's office.

Katherine was up early, and Arnold Smith—who was to be the second witness—arrived less than twenty minutes later, while Honora sat in her bedroom waiting to hear the summons that the electric brougham was at the door.

She was dressed in white—exquisite restrained white, suitably bridal when the fact of her being a bride obtruded itself, yet nothing in the costume of silk muslin and lace would have been out of place on a hot day up the river—and on her knee rested an open prayer-book.

Honora had never been one of those girls whose spare-time moments are devoted to ferreting out the naughtiness of Leviticus, and poring over certain poignant and indelicate paragraphs of the marriage service.

In fact she had never entirely read the nuptial formulæ until after the surrender of caution and conscience to one man's engulfing passion.

But she had read it then, and she was reading it now again, thankful, as the verbose repetitions stood out in clear type before her eyes, that she had persuaded Bernard to dispense with the church ceremony.

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"It's a case of forcibly subduing all my newly acquired citizenlike instincts," he had said with the touch of a smile on his unmoral mouth, "but if I commit the error of marrying a 'new' young woman who resents making vows to 'honour and obey' anything so trivial as a man, I must put up with the consequences of her newness! And after all it doesn't much matter, so long as—as——" and the sentence had been finished on her lips.

Yes, Honora was very glad that she would surrender her virtue, that she would break God-made laws without demanding God's blessing on the crime.

And of course it was a crime—bigamy couldn't possibly be called by any more courteous name!—but yet since that turbulent scene when Katherine, after the manner of Katherine, got her own way, Honora's conscience—or cowardice—seemed lulled to sleep.

She once more saw things as Katherine saw them. She realised that in giving Bernard her truly virgin self, and in according him the sole monopoly of her fidelity and love, she was acting virtuously according to nature's fundamental laws—and—as Katherine skilfully pointed out—the laws of nature were made before the laws of man.

And on this, her second wedding morning, Honora felt less cowardly than she had ever felt in all her life.

She was ready to go through with it, ready to brave risks and dangers, to deceive society, to deceive the man she loved, to deliberately become his mistress—for, as a legal marriage was not possible, this was

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the actual relation in which Honora Golt would stand towards Bernard Benstead.

People would call her "Mrs. Benstead" when she was in reality "Mrs. Golt," and when any day walking in any street she was quite likely to encounter the man who was really her husband.

Naturally these thoughts again and again passed through Honora's mind, but even when possibilities presented themselves in their blackest aspect, she never for one moment felt any desire to break her oath.

Katherine Orlitson's stupendous will-power still worked results, like some powerful drug which lingers in the system long after its administration has ceased.

Katherine had urged her to do this evil—if it was an evil—that good might come of it. And good should come—it *should*, because after all what is love but good?

And while Honora sat alone turning over the pages of a reprehensibly new prayer-book, Katherine paced up and down the "bood," every now and then addressing Arnold Smith, who was standing before an orientally framed glass readjusting his tie.

"I shan't be able to breathe freely till those two are tied up!" she cried, pressing the sides of her perfect waist as if for once her corsets were stiff and cramped instead of, as was really the case, allowing more than ample room for that thin sinuous body to bend and twist and do everything that a graceful woman's body should do. "It's a weird, extraordinary, paralysing, incredible situation, isn't it?"

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"Somewhat quaint, I must admit."

Katherine turned and snapped like a spoilt Italian greyhound might snap.

"Oh! *do* give way to italics and emphasise *sometimes!* It is so hopelessly middle class never to be emphatic when the occasion demands—as if you were afraid of letting loose in case your grammar would go wrong or something! *Isn't* the present situation absolutely stultifying?"

"*Ab—so—lute—ly un—par—ra—lel—led!*" replied Arnold with very obliging emphasis.

Mrs. Orlitson was appeased by this undeniable stress laid on five separate syllables.

"Yes, I do think that if any unfortunate woman was floating about between the devil and the deep sea, I am that woman," she went on. "If I confess I go to the devil, and if I don't confess it looks as if two other unfortunate people might tumble with me into the deep sea! D'you think I've done the best that could be done?"

"Quite the best, my dear, and when they're once spliced there's nothing to fidget about any more, is there?" responded Arnold Smith in the gently bored tones of a person who doesn't want to hear more than a certain amount of the world's worries.

"No, I suppose there isn't—though it does seem sort of hard luck all round. One thing I will say for myself, and that is if Honora had persisted in refusing to marry Berr I'd have run all risks and told her right away. I couldn't have been such a sweeplike sort of

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person as to spoil two lives just because—yes, Hendry, what is it?" as the decorous footman entered the room after giving the regulation knock at the "bood" door.

"The electric brougham is ready, madame."

"Is it? That's all right!" Mrs. Orlitson stuck out her thin chin and glided out of the room.

"Honora! Hon-o-ra!" she called.

Hardly any pause, then the gracious figure of a young white-clad woman came slowly down the corridor.

Honora moved calmly, smiled calmly, and on her face was the vivid flush which made her beautiful.

Katherine met her half-way, and slipped a hand through her arm.

"Dear, *dear* old girl!" she whispered.

Honora still smiled, pressed the thin ringed hand, and together they passed out and into the brougham, at the door of which Arnold Smith was waiting.

"I've lost my gloves, but you'll excuse it, won't you?" he said genially. "I always do lose gloves, like the man——"

Then followed an anecdote that would have just fitted in between savouries and dessert, and which on this occasion most admirably served to relieve the tension of the moment.

Katherine simply bubbled and gurgled at every point, and if by accident she laughed in the wrong place, the *raconteur* generously overlooked any such errors of risibility and went on with the anecdote,

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which eventually merged into another that lasted until the registry office was reached. Arnold's tact could be very triumphant at times.

On the doorstep Bernard was standing, big, bronzed, and lounge-suited, then as he came towards them and looked at Honora, Katherine suddenly realised all that could be in a woman's life if she was wholly and absolutely adored.

Her thin swathed throat worked convulsively for a second before she moved closer to Arnold and followed the lovers into the sordid, shabby, dusty little apartment which served as an office. The quartette were greeted by a snuffy man with an unnecessarily large nose and a soothing, consoling mourning manner.

Metaphorically the sort of man who always wore black gloves.

Behind a large table strewn with papers sat another man, whose nose was less large, and whose manner bristled with tired official importance.

He spoke to Bernard in a low voice, Bernard answered sheepishly—then Honora, Katherine, and Arnold were summoned to the table.

The large-nosed man once more approached to mumble some particulars concerning Bernard's age, parents, etc., out of a book, to which reiterated information the bridegroom mumbled acquiescence.

The same formula was repeated in Honora's case.

After this the officially important man cleared his throat, opened another book, and stood up.

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"Bernard Benstead — er — er—reason—un—un—Honora Vayne—er—un—— —— —er—wife———" he enquired in confidentially indistinct tones.

"Um—er—um——," seemed to come from the lower depths of Bernard's large chest.

"Honora Vayne"—he stumbled somewhat over the "Honora," and finally pronounced it Hon—*or*—a, with an aspirated H—"—er—um—er—reason———er—— ——ard Benstead—er—um——m—m—m—?"

Honora's response was equally intelligible, and when she and Bernard severally repeated a couple of sentences after the official man, Katherine's mouth stretched into a grin.

She longed to give the well-remembered gallery yell of "*Speak up!*"

Bernard then muttered another official assurance and jerked a ring on to Honora's finger, after which the official man banged together the book he was holding and opened another, while the large-nosed man assiduously dipped pens into a dirty inkpot.

Honora signed her name clearly, Bernard scrawled a hieroglyphic, Katherine appended some blots and dashes, and Arnold affixed a flourishless signature.

This concluded the ceremony which made Honora Golt ready to begin life as a bigamist!

"But are you *sure* they're married?" enquired Mrs. Orlitson of the large-nosed man, while Bernard placed various moneys in the official man's hand.

"Quite sure, ma'am," he replied soothingly.

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"Do you mean just because they've all been mumbling a few sentences nobody could hear that nothing but divorce could make them two free independent people again! Is it *really* binding and legal?"

"No marriage celebrated hat West—min—is—ter Habbey could be more legal, ma'am"—and the large-nosed man exhibited slight symptoms of huffiness. As a loyal registrar's clerk he always felt antagonistic towards abbeys, cathedrals, benedictions, best men, and orange blossoms.

"Well, I don't know," continued Katherine when a clink from the region of Bernard's palm had restored the large-nosed man to good humour. "My poor Roger and I wouldn't have been at all satisfied with this. We had quite a nice wedding at a church, even though I had been playing second lead the night before. My late husband was a very romantic man, you know," she continued, turning to Arnold, who looked gravely and suitably interested, "with a strong strain of religion running through his romance. Such a noble fellow, Tim, possessed of every virtue a man could possess! So reliable, so energetic, so economical, so enterprising, so unselfish! Ah-h-h!"

Arnold Smith echoed the sigh out of sympathy.

"It's always those splendid fellows who are taken and we slackers who are left!" was his gently tactful response.

By this time they were all re-entering the electric brougham, and twenty minutes later reached Holstein Mansions, where the bride and bridegroom had ar-

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ranged to partake of a swift lunch before catching the 2.40 train for Transley.

"It does seem piffle to spend your honeymoon among a lot of fowls!" remarked Katherine as they sat down to galantines and Pommery.

"Not at all—it's an excellent wheeze to sponge on your wife's hospitality right away. By staying at Deerbuck I get saved the expense of hotel bills," replied Bernard, who, after the manner of Englishmen when they feel touched and sentimental, was presenting an almost brutally practical aspect, and when he addressed Honora not one note of tenderness softened his voice.

But Honora understood—she was quivering and throbbing in every pulse, and she understood.

At half-past one the bride changed into a cream serge travelling costume, and at half-past two she and the bridegroom were sitting in a first-class carriage turning over the leaves of various illustrated papers.

The magnetism of restraint was holding them both, and the fact of sitting comparatively far apart when they might be crushed in each other's arms was intensely piquant.

"Another air-ship keeping persistently clear of the sky!" commented Honora, indicating a reproduced photograph of several men, several ropes, and a big cigar-like monster lying where the laws of gravitation intended it to lie.

"Yes!" responded Bernard lazily, as he turned to the racing news.

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But they were neither of them feeling remotely interested in illustrations or winners.

Each was only thinking of the other, being passionately conscious of the other's presence, anticipating kisses to come, mentally living future hours full of rapture.

"I see two of old Hookenstein's mares won again on Saturday. He's got the very devil's—or Jew's!—own luck!" was Bernard's next observation.

Honora laughed jerkily.

"Jews aren't so bad; they've got some very good points," she answered.

"I've never seen any—even their beastly noses are without points!" replied Bernard, with Christian hostility.

This was all very banal, but it served to keep the moments poignant and aloof.

Both continued reading steadily, and when a couple of hours later the train halted at Transley station the first marriage kiss was still ungiven.

But ah! the rapture of procrastination, the passion of putting off!

The square lumbering fly was waiting to meet them at the station, and as they drove through the summer country air neither Bernard nor Honora made any further pretence of being interested in air-ships or mares.

The fervid hush and the fervid sounds of summer were everywhere, and those two were just waiting to be happy as the birds were happy—as God meant man and woman to be happy.

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Just once their hands met and clasped, but they parted quickly. Wonderful moments mustn't be anticipated.

Presently they turned down the rutted entrance-road which Honora had left streaked with miniature ditches made by the weight of cartwheels, but which now was dry and powdered with fine white dust.

It was summer—it was summer, and "love-time is the summer time!"

The greeting of Mary Tryke and her husband was respectfully cordial, for the worthy couple approved of matrimony, just as strenuously as they unknowingly disapproved of love.

The lower classes of a certain type understand marriage with its imperial, domestic, and moral motives, but they can't understand love. They don't want to. They wouldn't know what to do with it if they did understand.

"I've got the large room ready, ma'am, because I——" began Mrs. Tryke.

"Yes, yes, I'm sure, Mary, your arrangements are splendid—they always were—how nice everything looks—Juliet, and Portia, and Maudie, just as fat as ever, I see!—fifty more than when I left, aren't there?" interrupted Honora, speaking with a rapidity that could have outraced the swift volubility of Mrs. Orlitson herself.

Bernard was looking at the horizon. He didn't seem quite sure where sea began and where sky ended.

"Perhaps you'd like tea, ma'am?" enquired Mary

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Tryke, a shade less cordially. She didn't care for having her sentences interrupted.

"I think so—yes—er—don't you?" answered Honora, addressing Bernard without using his name. An extraordinary shyness was possessing her—she felt as if they had suddenly become strangers.

"Yes—it wouldn't be bad!" he replied carelessly.

"I'll go up and wash my hands; then I'll come down at once."

"Right!"

The excellent Mary shook her head as she walked into the kitchen where Tryke was making up the fire.

"Things is wrong there!" she announced, jerking her head upwards.

"Thought there wasn't much sweet-'earting about," replied her man.

"Sweet-'earting! Not much of that! They've both made a mistake, and now it's too late they've found it out!" was Mary's verdict.

"Aye! Well, they've got ter make th' best of it, poor souls! Them as God is joined tergether, it's no man's job ter put asunder!"—and Tryke sighed a bucolic sigh which perhaps wasn't quite complimentary to the excellent Mary.

When Honora reached the large chintz-draped room she threw aside her hat and splashed her face with cold water.

As a rule she used water that was warm and possibly perfumed with a few drops of some aromatic vinegar, but to-day nothing but a cold, brisk splash would

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do—something hearty, something healthy to chill the strange fires that seemed burning her skin and burning her senses.

When her face was dried and lightly dusted with powder, Honora picked out every crushed Empire curl with a long hat-pin.

What else could she do? Should she unpack? She didn't want to go down—she dreaded going down——

Tap-tap!

"Tea's quite ready, ma'am, and Mr. Benstead's a-waiting," sounded Mary's half-commiserating, half-severe voice.

Honora opened the door and ran downstairs without any further delay.

She was glad of the summons, because, without it, she would possibly *never* have gone down!

Bernard was already putting milk and sugar in the cups, and when Honora had filled up the tea he cut a piece of cake and strolled to the window.

Mary Tryke was scandalised. She *did* think a bridegroom might give his bride a few minutes' grace, and she *did* think they would have sat down—rather close together perhaps—at table.

Taking tea and cake to the window indeed!

Poor things! Well, what they'd done they couldn't undo, and there was nothing for them but to make the best of it!

Mrs. Tryke really felt very sorry and quite shocked.

And while she was feeling sorry tea and cake were

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hardly tasted—just because two people were nearly choked with emotional love!

Uncomprehending Mary Tryke!

"Let's go for a stroll," suggested Bernard suddenly.

Honora rose at once, and without putting on a hat, passed through the French window. She knew, she knew so well, what he was going to say!

"Let's go to the woods!"

In silence they made their way through crowds of gluttonous fowls and chickens assembled to revolt because the pail of maize was ten minutes late in making its appearance—along the rutted road—up a grassy slope—across a square half tree-shaded field—and into "the hush of the woods"!

When their love was first born among these same trees it had been an autumn hush—but to-day it was the hush of fervid, young, passionate, eager summer.

They trod the silent moss, and penetrated farther into the sun-flecked shadows, till an enchanted gloom surrounded them on every side.

"*Honora!*"

It was just one whisper dropped from an unmoral mouth, but it told everything, meant everything, asked everything.

Restraint, the mutual game of make-believe calmness, unspoken anticipation, had done all that could be done to stimulate the magnificent ferocity of human passion.

Honora and Bernard faced each other—the lips of

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both were white—the eyes of both were glassy and dilated——

"Honora! You must come to me now—it's—in—the—hush—of—the—woods!"

And she went to him—she felt his mouth piercing her parted lips——

She was not his wife—not his wife—but it didn't matter—nothing mattered now, nor ever would matter again——

"*Bernard!*"

It was a cry, almost an involuntary, unconscious appeal—but a kiss stifled it, and afterwards there was silence in the hush of the woods.

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CHAPTER XXIX

Lady Chesham—who was staying in with a cold—and her husband were talking—at least Evelyn was talking and Charles was listening, after the approved manner of well-trained purchased husbands.

"Yes, now that Honora Vayne—at least Honora Benstead—has gone, Katherine really ought to have someone to live there!" was Lady Chesham's conclusion to a long sentence.

"I thinksh she doesh! Mr. Arnold Shmith sheems to live there," replied Sir Charles, whose utterance appeared to become more inarticulate as the season advanced and greater demands were made upon his conversational powers.

"Don't say things like that, Charles, and don't infer—inference is such intensely bad form. Of course no one would really think any harm of dear Katherine, but as she was introduced under my wing, so to speak, I naturally feel in a measure responsible for her reputation."

"Heavy reshponsibility—a widowsh reputation!"

Sir Charles would have received a second reproof had not a sneeze from his wife intervened—a stifled, ladylike sneeze which reminded him to draw a silk shawl round her shoulders, somewhat in the mechanical way which a trained poodle carries in his mouth a newspaper that he doesn't in the least want to carry.

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The kept husband is apt to become a very mechanical commodity.

"Howsh the *Worldly Woman* getting on?" was Sir Charles' next effort at conversation.

"An astounding success—it's wonderful how it seemed to leap into favour with the first number, and Mrs. Burham says that little poem I wrote on dahlias made even more of a hit than she guessed at first. It seems strange that I should have lived—er—a certain number of years without guessing that I had a gift for writing verse, doesn't it?"

"Oh, I don't know, a lot of hidden giftsh knocking about, my dearesht," responded Sir Charles, just as their private footman—the Cheshams didn't like being waited on by hotel servants—entered to announce—"*Mrs. Burham!*"

Lady Chesham greeted her visitor with the excessive cordiality of a person who has been rather fed-up with her own society all day.

"I'm really glad to see you!" she exclaimed, clasping Mrs. Burham's medium-sized hand, which the Toronto Glove Company clothed in return for bi-weekly "pars" in the *Worldly Woman*.

"Ah, you won't be so glad when you hear I've come to wring another poem from you! We must have one —we positively *must* have one in the first issue of next month," replied Mrs. Burham, who knew that a brief verse couldn't hurt any circulation, while unlimited orders to be sent and given to every person Lady Ches-

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ham had ever seen or known, in any and every part of the world, would be a nice little help.

"My dear, I really don't think I've time——"

"Lady Chesham, you must *make* time! I know that an over-devoted and over-exigent husband takes up a tremendous lot of time—yes, Sir Charles, I won't let you off—but just for half an hour or so you must neglect the unworldly man"—Sir Charles' smile was sickly—"for the *Worldly Woman*. We *need* that poem!"

"Well, if you need it I suppose you must have it, Mrs. Burham. Now how would a little thing do about second love—comparing it to the second crop of July roses, or something of the sort?"

"Charming idea! Admirable! And singularly appropriate just now!"

"Appropriate? Why?"

But Mrs. Burham laid one of the "par"-paid gloves upon her lips.

"I won't say—no, really I won't. I'm sure she'll want to tell you herself—*I* only know because I just happened to go round there directly it was settled," she replied with ostentatious discretion.

"My dear Mrs. Burham, you've raised my curiosity, and you must set it at rest again—or else no poem for your next number!"

This threat worked the desired result, and Mrs. Burham told her news.

"Our charming little friend, Mrs. Orlitson, has just become engaged to that very nice, very entertaining

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Mr. Arnold Smith, and the wedding is to take place before Goodwood!"

"I'm delighted to hear it—delighted! Dear Katherine! and Arnold Smith is really charming! I've often thought I could be half in love with him myself! (Now don't frown, you silly old Othello!) And when was it arranged, do you say?"

"Only this afternoon. I went round to discuss a new special column with Mrs. Orlitson, and found the happy man in the enviable position of Mrs. Orlitson's accepted lover!"

"Very nice—and they always got on so well together. Of course they knew each other before Mr. Smith was seen about in town, didn't they?"

"*Very* slightly. Just met a few times when Mrs. Orlitson and her husband were on their honeymoon, that's all. I know for a fact, because some friends of mine used to know Arnold Smith very well." And Mrs. Burham's tone was decisive and all-clinching.

Katherine had made her editress of the *Worldly Woman*, and Mrs. Burham's lips were eternally sealed in a loyal cause.

In fact, to all intents and purposes, she had forgotten that Langley Cross boasted of an inn where week-end couples could disport themselves under assumed names and in sylvan bliss.

"Well, I am glad, truly glad!" reiterated Lady Chesham. "Dear Katherine has chosen a really nice man—much nicer than that florid Dr. Sphait, whom I was afraid had aspirations in that direction."

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Mrs. Burham smiled steelily.

"We like Dr. Sphait, and there is no doubt that his future will be particularly brilliant. The Duchess of Hexborough's extraordinary cure has positively made him. *We* like him very much. He and Enid are great companions," was her reply—and as Enid was one of the three marriageable daughters who didn't marry, this concluding sentence was significant.

Lady Chesham was thoughtful for a moment. She didn't like being hospitable, particularly at an expensive hotel, but then again she was more than a little tired of being alone with a husband and a cold in the head.

"Are you engaged this evening, Mrs. Burham—you and your daughter Enid?" she enquired, after mentally totaling up the probable cost of dining five people without any special courses, and with the St. Monarch's cheapest champagne all throughout the meal—that is to say, appearing at the *entrée* and exiting at the earliest possible opportunity. The St. Monarch's waiters knew Lady Chesham's methods.

"Well, of course we're always engaged—one always is—but on this particular occasion we needn't be, if anything more attractive turns up. Why, Lady Chesham?"

"Because I thought of giving a little impromptu betrothal dinner, fixed up on the telephone. Just you and Enid, dear Katherine and Arnold Smith, Dr. Sphait, ourselves, and another odd man to balance."

"That would be delightful, dear Lady Chesham—

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we could easily drop the other affair, because Enid and I never trouble ourselves about politeness when inclination is in the way." The "other affair" was dining off three courses at home, before attending a feeble debate at a literary woman's club!

"Very well, then, let's try to arrange it, Charles." Sir Charles contrived to look partially intelligent and alert. "Go down to the 'phone, will you, dear, and ring up Katherine. Tell her I am overjoyed at her news, and that I insist upon her dining here at eight with Mr. Smith to celebrate the event. Mind you mention what a bad cold I've got. Then 'phone up Dr. Sphait and ask him, and also any other nice suitable man to make us eight in number—not Colonel Carey!" Colonel Carey was a War Office dignitary whose thirst remained persistently unimpaired and unassuaged from *hors d'œuvres* to dessert.

"Rightsh!" responded the purchased husband, as he obediently left the room and made his way to the hall telephone.

"I hope Arnold Smith is well off," said Lady Chesham when Charles had closed the door behind him. "Of course dear Katherine has plenty for both, but the idea of a man living on his wife's money is always very dreadful to me—though when I have to go and worry poor Charles to settle big bills that can't be covered by my allowance, I sometimes think it must be a rather convenient state of things! Ha! ha!"

"Ha! ha!" echoed Mrs. Burham, feeling cynical amusement where a more human person would have

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felt pity. It was just a little sad to note Evelyn Chesham's life-long game of pretence.

"And—er—oh, yes—is Arnold Smith well off?"

"Very, I think. Mrs. Orlitson told me that he wanted to buy a country place, and take a big town house, but that she——"

At this juncture Sir Charles returned.

"I'm heavy with meshshages—lemme get 'em off my chesht," he said, dropping limply on to a chair. "Let me shee now—(1) *Mrs. Orlitson sends 'tons of love, and sesh you're a scrumptious petling, and that she and Tim will revel in coming to receive your blessing and eat your food.*' . . . Dr. Sphait at first thought he couldn't come, but evenshually decided that a few rheumatic princes and a handful of nervy dukes could be put on one side—so he'sh coming! . . . And for the other man I've got C. S. Lorriner—he's on a diet cure, and only eats dry toast washed down with hot water, but I told him it was hish society and not hish appetite we wanted."

Lady Chesham threw a glance of very real approval at her husband.

This was well-doing indeed. C. S. Lorriner was *the* ideal guest for an hotel dinner-party with charges at so much per head and the customary criminal profit made on wine.

C. S. Lorriner should have the very best dry toast and the very finest hot water that special managerial attention could procure!

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CHAPTER XXX

THE remainder of that afternoon Lady Chesham spent in the Turkish bath, after which a prolonged cooling process and continued inhalations of the Patent Concentrated Southern Air Breathing Ball made it possible for her—attired in a high-neck velvet gown and affectively swathed with an Indian shawl—to receive her guests in the inner lounge.

Mrs. Burham—strangely garbed in a crushed, soiled, spangled Dress Agency bargain—and the eldest marriageable daughter—who, so far, hadn't married—arrived first, and looked hungry.

Enid Burham cultivated the Cléo de Merode type which, when badly done, always looks hungry.

They talked royalties for a few moments till almost simultaneously Dr. Sphait and C. S. Lorriner appeared upon the scenes.

"So glad you could put off exigent patients and come to our little betrothal celebration, Dr. Sphait," said Lady Chesham, with a funny touch of *grande dame* patronage in her voice.

"Yes, I was able to make work subservient to pleasure just for once," replied Dr. Sphait, in tones of Harley Street cheeriness which were quite different to Seedlingditch cheeriness. "But—er—betrothal feast? This sounds very romantic, Lady Chesham! Who are the—er—*verlobt?*"

"My dear friend, Mrs. Orlitson, and Mr. Arnold Smith—just engaged to-day! Isn't it interesting?"

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"Delightfully interesting! Dear me! A charming couple! Well, that really *is* interesting!"—and for a moment it was the overdone bad form Seedlingditch cheeriness again! Morgan B. Sphait was just a little unprepared.

"I'm sorry to hear about your unsociable diet restrictions," was Lady Chesham's next remark made to C. S. Lorriner, while, by a query, Mrs. Burham snared Dr. Sphait to Enid's side.

"Yes, but I've got a reprieve to-day," replied the gentlemanly man with a speckled nose.

"A—a—reprieve?"

"Yes, I 'phoned to my medico and asked for a holiday. Told him I wanted a few hours' sociable gluttony —ha! ha!—and in reply the excellent person told me to eat as much as I like, drink as much as I like, and be as merry as I like for six hours! So, hot water and dry toast can make their exit from my menu—'*just for to-night, only to-night,*' as the out-of-date song says! Ha! ha!"

Lady Chesham jerked out a bravely cordial rejoinder, and had just given Sir Charles an optical telegraphic message to the effect that a whisper must be dropped into the head waiter's heeding ear, when most people who had been dotted about the lounge looking bored became surreptitiously alert.

A woman—a woman followed by a man—was rustling across the huge hall with an air of glorious insolence which unconsciously insisted that this particular hotel, in fact every hotel in London—possibly all London itself—belonged to her and her alone.

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She wore black—wonderful, mysterious, iridescent black, suggesting founts of hidden silver, hidden mother-of-pearl, hidden moonlight—with skirts clinging to the knees and from them flowing and swirling in yards of sable shimmering billows at the back, sides, and in the front.

Her thin dead-white bosom and back were bare, with only black velvet straps upon the shoulders, but the thin arms were hidden by full, generous sleeves and black gloves. Her red hair blazed and was puffed out in marvellous profusion, while the customary black bird of paradise feathers—which she wore better than any woman in London—swept backward and touched one white shoulder-blade.

Her mouth was vivid with lip-salve—her light grey eyes glittered—her white face was soft with *poudre véloutée*—her unclassified features didn't matter—for once she was beautiful!

"My dearest Evelyn, how absolutely *sweet* of you to ask us, and have us, and feed us!" she cried, taking both Lady Chesham's hands. "Of *course* we are late, but now for the future"—here she indicated Arnold by an insolent movement of one uncovered shoulder—"you must reckon that I shall *always* be late. Here is Tim, and he ventures to kiss your hand in spirit! . . . More how-d'you-do's to you, Sir Charles, though we said lots of pretty things to each other over the 'phone, didn't we—ah! Mrs. Burham, once again!—how do, Enid?—you look like a divine up-to-date Madonna—I do *love* those innocent little hair-droops! . . . Greetings,

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Mr. Lorriner—greetings, Dr. Sphait, and millions of congrats on some more miracles I hear you've been performing!"

Katherine rattled on, laughed perpetually, and before the other seven more or less dull people had been paired off, and seated, and provided with soup, an electric current of easy, intimate sociability was making a circuit round the table.

Everybody felt witty, felt the consciousness of being individually successful, of being original, of being smart when nobody—unless it was the bridegroom elect—was anything except commonplacely mediocre.

But the magnetism of Roger Orlitson's widow, who would soon be the wife of Roger Orlitson's chum, generated its own thrills in seven other bosoms and seven other brains. She made them all, for the time being, part of herself, and the sharers of her own indomitable vitality.

"Salt, Mrs. Orlitson?—it'll be awfully difficult to learn to call you '*Mrs. Smith*'!" remarked Sir Charles because he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Ah, but you'll never have to—will he, Tim?" replied Katherine, looking over to Lady Chesham's escort. The table, by being small and oval, made cross-conversation easy.

"Won't have to what?" enquired Arnold lazily. He was taking olives out of a dish, one after another. He liked olives. The dish would soon be empty.

"Won't have to call me '*Mrs. Smith*'—no, I'm going to be Katherine Orlitson—*Katherine Smith-Orlit-*

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son, for all time to come!—for one reason because 'Smith' is *too* uninspiring to follow Katherine——"

"Bad tashte on Shmith's part! I'd follow in any dishtance!"

"Good, Sir Charles!—and thank you! Yes, that's one reason, and another is th-that——"—for a second the slurring, rumbling voice was hushed with a hint of reverence—"poor Roger always used to say if ever I—I were left alone, he hoped—but you understand—his ideas were always original, and as Tim doesn't mind being 'Smith-Orlitson' by 'letters patent,' or 'ENT: STAT: HALL:' or whatever it is, that'll be all right—won't it, Tim?"

"Quite all right—er—dearest. A rose—any other name—sweet smelling—I'm the rose!" replied Tim. "In fact, I once knew a man who——"

And for the next ten minutes Tim shone.

"But, Mrs. Orlitson, what will you do with that dear, divine flat?" asked Enid Burham, when, later on, the conversation once more veered round to the main topic of the evening.

"Live in it!" was Katherine's prompt reply—followed, of course, by a little ripple of unpunctuated laughs. "Yes, sounds funny to sort of take your husband in to lodge, doesn't it? but I simply *can't* give up the flat after taking such *lots* of trouble to choose *everything* in it, and fixing, and planning, and selecting all the oddments to suit my own taste. So Tim's going to buy the whole thing as it stands, and I'm going to make a big profit out of the deal—though the poor

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thing is trained to think that he's purchasing at an alarming sacrifice! Not a bad idea, is it, to sell one's own flat and furniture to one's own husband, and then to make him give back all the money to put in one's own bank! Ha! ha!"

Everybody applauded the plan except Lady Chesham. She was silent from sheer force of supreme absorbing admiration.

She had been maintaining a husband for some years, but she had never been able to bluff the world so boldly and brilliantly as this!

There was no emergency for which this red-haired widow with the perfect waist was not prepared.

When the St. Monarch's second-priced *table d'hôte* dinner had come to an end, and Lady Chesham had risen for departure, Dr. Sphait cleared his throat.

"May I venture to propose the health of the future Mrs. Orlitson-Smith, with the wish and belief that her coming life-course may be steered through happy, *safe*, and prosperous waters!" he said.

Glasses were raised.

"Hear, hear!" sounded the thin voice of Mrs. Burham. "In all *loyalty*, doctor, I second the toast!"

"*Hear, hear!*" was the all-round response—hushed to meet the requirements of an hotel public dining-room. And as Roger Orlitson's widow smiled first at the Seedlingditch doctor, then at the one-day visitor to Langley Cross, she knew that the Harley Street suite and the glazed periodical had nobly done their work.

Everything was safe.

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CHAPTER XXXI

Goodwood would commence on Tuesday, and Katherine Orlitson's wedding had been to-day.

In to-morrow's papers the name of "Orlitson" would again figure in the same columns—but a different section!—that it figured in nearly sixteen months ago.

Sixteen months ago the name of "Roger Orlitson" had been among the deaths, and to-morrow among the marriages would be:

"SMITH-ORLITSON—ORLITSON.—On July 24, at St. George's, Hanover Square, Arnold Smith-Orlitson, only son of the late Eliah Smith, of Sydney, Australia, to Katherine Susan Orlitson, widow of the late Roger Orlitson."

Already Mrs. Burham and her less socially aspiring sisters in journalism were forcing gush out of oft-perjured stylographic pens.

The bride had "looked charming in the palest shade of jeune colombe grey, with the effectively original addition of a grey tulle bridal veil to match, and held in place by diamond stars—one of the bridegroom's numerous and costly gifts."

Mrs. Bernard Benstead was being pronounced "*radiant in white crêpe de Chine, with plumed hat en suite,*" and among the other presents, Lady Chesham's gift of

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a tortoiseshell—celluloid—and feathered theatre fan was duly being chronicled, while the information was likewise given that "*before starting for a prolonged Continental tour, with Mr. and Mrs. Bernard Benstead, Mr. and Mrs. Arnold Smith-Orlitson would remain a week in Folkestone.*"

"Well, I'm glad that's over, but I can't quite make out why Kits has done it!" remarked Bernard, as he and Honora were being rushed back to Transley by a noisy express train.

"Perhaps she's in love with Arnold. The idea is primitive, I know, but there may be something in it," replied Honora.

"People do that sort of thing sometimes—of course!"

Then they both laughed and kissed each other from the sheer happiness of loving each other and being together—for that delicious, tantalising restraint which had preceded marriage was over now, and kisses came as naturally as words.

Bernard drew his wife into the big hollow of his shoulder, and went on discussing the situation.

"Yes, as you say, Mrs. Benstead"—it was still very rapturous to realise that name was hers—"people do fall in love sometimes—but that isn't what Kits has done. She isn't in love with Tim."

"No, I don't think she is *in* love, though I think she loves—or nearly loves—him, which is a very different matter."

"Umph! P'r'aps!" Bernard wasn't an expert at

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subtleties. "I don't believe he even nearly loves her, though."

"Oh, yes, Berr, he does—at least, as far as it is possible for him to love anyone. There are some who can't love, no matter how nicely and affectionately they try!"

"And some women too, I suppose?"

"No, not women—*all* women can love. There was never yet a woman born who didn't have it in her power to love *something*—perhaps a man, perhaps a child, perhaps an animal—far more dearly than she loves herself. But men, some men, haven't the capacity for devotion, just as some people haven't an ear for music. And I believe Tim is one of them. It would be just as impossible for him to really *love* as—as—for you to sing 'Rule Britannia' in tune!"

Here Honora paused to receive due punishment for this last deliberate impertinence. Then the conversation continued.

"Well, if Tim could really love, and Kits is only amiably fond of him, I'm dashed if I can see why they've tacked themselves on to each other's lives."

"Oh, I don't know—every man needs some woman in his life, and every woman is better off when she's walking in a man's shadow."

"Yes, but not a man who prefers his sport, his food, and himself generally to his wife!"

"I wouldn't be sure—one can never tell the tastes of other people. It's my belief that Katherine actually wouldn't *like* loving and being loved as—as we understand it, Berr!"

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He bent and kissed her fervently—on the lips, not at all a marital kiss.

"I—I don't think *anyone* could understand it as we understand, darling," he answered after a moment; "but all the same, I wish poor little Kits' second venture was a bit nearer being the real thing. I wonder if she was desperately keen on Roger!—poor chap! I often wish I'd seen him! Perhaps she was so awfully fond of him that actually the notion of loving any other man would be distasteful."

Honora didn't say anything, and she managed not to smile—but it was not easy for anyone who remembered Mrs. Orlitson within four months of her bereavement!—Mrs. Orlitson, who had brought life, and fun, and gaiety, and flippancy to the chicken farm when her widowhood was still in its earliest infancy!

No, Honora did *not* think that Katherine had been "desperately keen" on her first husband!

"I wonder how we shall enjoy the *partie carée* tour," was Bernard's next observation, after several more miles had been left behind.

"Immensely—of course."

"Yes, of course; but I shall be sorry to leave the farm, the farm where I found my wife among the fowls—that wife who wanted the very devil of a lot of trapping, and leaving, and persuading, before she'd marry me! You were very much off me at first, weren't you, sweetheart?"

Honora looked up at him, then suddenly threw both arms round his neck and buried her face in his throat.

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"Off him!" when she had been his from that very first moment when his quizzical eyes met hers among the shadows of the wood!—when her resistance had been agony—and when now—even though there were hideous truths lurking at every corner of life's rose-strewn highway—existence spent with him meant the consummation of all her heart had ever needed.

The train accelerated speed, causing an increased vibration which suddenly flung Honora yet closer against her husband's breast. Again his unmoral mouth found her vivid separated lips in a kiss of unfulfilled desire—for though she was his wife, his everything that a woman can be to a man, Bernard always felt as though their love story had hardly yet begun.

Every kiss was a kiss of courtship, every morning the commencement of a honeymoon, and every night the consummation of a wedding day.

There was no satiety, and, curiously, little intimacy, for although their love relations were electric with ardour, both Bernard and Honora were sufficiently artists in passion to realise the disastrous effects of complete marital intimacy.

Just as the first journey after their marriage had ended without a kiss, so forty-eight hours would often pass almost without touch of lips or hands.

There was a continual garnering of emotions, with harvests of rapture in between.

And to-day it was harvest time. During the brief stay at Katherine's flat, and during the rush of wedding

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preparations, Bernard and his wife had seen little or nothing of each other.

But passion's seeds had been sowing afresh, and now it was time to reap.

The train rocked and swayed, they swayed with it, lips and bodies being pressed closer together with every vibration, till at last, when speed slackened before entering Transley station, both felt that the ending of this short journey was one of life's best hours gone.

But it was peaceful and perfect to be back at the scene of their first love-meeting, and when they entered the cool, shady dining-room, where Mary Tryke's yellow cakes and yellow apricot jam were set out ready for tea, Bernard suddenly raised his wife's hand to his lips and kissed it with a mouth which, at that moment, looked absolutely *moral.*

This half-ceremonious caress was an act of homage —the homage which most men carry at their hearts to be laid at the shrine of a love that is lawful, a woman who is pure, and a child that is their own.

That evening after supper Bernard and Honora played draw bridge at tenpence a hundred, went to bed early, rose early the next morning, walked over the downs before breakfast, collected eggs after breakfast, lunched in the paddock, dozed beneath the shadow of a hayrick after lunch, paid several formal calls to Bessie's stye—Honora, in a burst of happy absurdity, insisted on leaving cards, which Bessie demolished with the slow greed of an epicure—and altogether spent twenty hours of complete domestic contentment.

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"It's quite extraordinary how happy we are, isn't it?" remarked Bernard, as they left the porcine quarters and walked slowly towards the house. He spoke in an unbiassed, practical tone of voice amusingly free from enthusiasm.

"It is, but I suppose we shall get over it in time," replied Honora reflectively.

"Oh, I suppose so!"

A silence—a furtive laugh—the swift, surreptitious linking and unlinking of two hands that happened to be near each other and idle—then one of those dreamy silences which fill up a lot of gaps that would be spoilt by words.

It was a beautiful, mellow silence, and when a woman's raucous, spiteful voice broke through the magic muteness, Honora flinched as though she had suffered some physical hurt.

On the other side of a hedge Mary Tryke was speaking in the loud, bullying tones of lower class feminine anger.

"'Ow dare you come 'ere and play with my Charlie, you shameful 'ussy. Your mother ought to 'ave enough decency to keep you a'-tome—though 'tisn't to be expected she'd know what decency is! Get along with you, and don't let me catch you skulking round 'ere again!"

"But, mother, we 'aven't finished playing snakes," whimpered the root vegetable-like son of the Trykes.

"I don't care—you must find a reppy-table companion ter play with, and not a—humph! well, it's not for me to use the word, but——"

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At this juncture the excellent matron's harangue came to a premature halt, owing to the appearance of Mr. and Mrs. Benstead on the scenes—for Bernard and Honora had skirted the hedge to confront Mary Tryke, who was red and active with anger, Charlie Tryke, who was freckled and resentful, and a little girl who was crying softly and very piteously.

She was a particularly pretty little girl, with something besides the pink beauty of rustic childhood in her face, and her blue tear-filled eyes already seemed as if they were reflecting tumultuous human emotions.

"Who is this little girl, and what has she done?" demanded Honora, laying one hand on the child's pinafored shoulder. The little girl looked up at her and moved nearer.

"It's Biddy Gennifer, ma'am," answered Mary sullenly.

"And what has she done that you should speak so—so inhumanly and abominably?" The beautifying flush had deepened on Honora's face, and her wonderful eyes were dilated, while Bernard remained in the background.

These were his wife's premises, his wife's *employés*, and his interference would be an impertinence. But he was there if she wanted him—he would always be everywhere and anywhere if she wanted him.

"Excuse me, ma'am, if you knew the circumstances you would——"

"What are the circumstances?"

"I'd—I'd rather not say, ma'am——" Here

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Mrs. Tryke paused and glanced significantly at Bernard.

Honora was now holding the little girl by the hand.

"I order you to say," she answered. "No child is spoken to like that on my premises without an explanation being given. What has this little girl done?"

"It isn't 'er so much, ma'am, as 'er mother!"

"And what has her mother done?"

"Well, ma'am, if you *will* make me say such things in front of a gentleman, Biddy's *father wasn't never married to her mother!*"

Honora grew very white. A terrible, awful passion was surging within her. For a moment it seemed as if she could not speak—but at last the words came—tense, restrained, low-spoken words.

"Do you mean, is it possible that you were *daring* to send this inoffending little girl away from my farm just because her parents were not married? Is it possible that lower class bigotry and criminal narrow-mindedness can have reached such an appalling and horrible pitch?"

"Well, ma'am, it's for you to do what you like on your farm, but it's not for me to 'ave my child associating with low-born bast——"

But by an upraised hand Honora stopped the word.

"Yes, it *is* for me to do what I like on my farm, and what I now do is to give you and your husband notice! Understand that you all leave Deerbuck a month from to-day. Bernard, please will you carry Biddy in to tea? I know you'd like a ride, wouldn't you, Biddy?"

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Biddy's dancing eyes—from which the tears had disappeared—left no room for doubt upon the subject, and as Bernard obediently hoisted the small, nameless person on to his large shoulder, he felt towards his wife as he had never felt before.

Until then he believed he had gone through all the gamut of emotions so far as Honora was concerned, but after witnessing the girl's splendid, great-hearted passion, he knew there was something else.

And never before had Biddy understood the royal munificence conveyed by that one word "tea."

She had a little cloth and little tray all to herself, and the disagreeable woman was ordered to bring hot cakes, and preserves, and fruits, and honey, while the beautiful dark-eyed lady spread, and cut, and pared, and tried to make her eat more than Biddy's little stomach could hold with anything like comfort.

It was a regal time, and when at last Biddy was sent home with genial David Gedge in the hay cart, she felt very pleased that the disagreeable woman had stopped her playing snakes with the ugly little boy.

Honora stood at the window and waved till the hay cart was out of sight, then she turned round and sobbed tempestuously on the large shoulder of Bernard's coat.

He didn't say anything, but there is no doubt that tender pats and pressures, and little sudden squeezes, are at times more emollient than words.

They proved so in this instance, and after a much shorter interval than might have been expected, Honora contrived to make a connected remark.

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"Isn't it an—an—infamous world, Berr?" she jerked out tremulously.

"Yes, darling, I suppose it is." There was the man's cautious, more reasonable leniency in his tones.

"Oh, don't 'suppose'; you must be so *sure* after to-day's experience! Poor innocent, unoffending little Biddy!"

"Poor kid; But she and her erring mamma have been well avenged." The man's levity in his voice hurt her just a little. "You've discharged two excellent servants for their sakes—what are you going to do without 'em, darling?"

Honora looked at him half shyly—it was a pretty look.

"If you think you can afford to keep, feed and clothe me altogether, I propose to give up the farm," she said.

The millionaire—it was always so difficult to remember that Bernard Benstead was a millionaire—gave her left ear a small pinch.

"I b'lieve I could run to it," he answered, still continuing the soothing pats and strokes.

"Then at that rate I—I shall give the farm to little Biddy!"

"My—dear!"

"Yes, yes, Berr, I shall. The mother can manage it for her, with help—I shall see about a reliable man—and then the poor little soul will be a person of property in her tiny way. Something must be done to make up to her for to-day and all the to-morrows!"

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Bernard laughed very much, and kissed his wife very often.

"Of all the emotional, silly, sweet, absurd, darling, exaggerated young women I've ever met, my 'good lady' is the most so! Fancy giving away some hundreds of excellent fowls, half a score of desirable pigs, and a most commodious house to a small kid, just because its parents are a couple of blackguards!"

"*Blackguards*, Berr? Wh—what do you mean?"

Honora had drawn back from the most intimate closeness of the embrace, and her voice sounded chill.

"I mean, darling, that two people who wilfully, and for their own satisfaction, hurl some unfortunate human creature into the world weighted by the band of illegitimacy, ought to be sent to penal servitude. Let people do what they like with their own morals, of course, but when it's come to a child—*ugh!* it's brutal!"

"Have you always thought this—this sort of thing, Bernard?"

"Always. Mary Tryke's attitude is only the world's attitude. I've seen it and realised it so often, and by heavens, if I thought that the crime of leaving an illegitimate son or daughter could be put down to my account, I'd—good Lord! I'd feel very much inclined to put an end to the poor devil—or myself! The father's bad enough in such cases, but in a way I think the mother's worse, because one expects pity and compassion from a woman—and a woman who brings a nameless child into the world has neither. Don't you agree with me, Mrs. Big-Eyes?"

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Honora looked at him in a dazed, unseeing way, and answered mechanically.

"I do—oh, yes—I agree with you!" Then she lay back against his shoulder once more, and pressed her hand to her forehead—theatrically.

"Darling, does the poor little black-curled head ache?" cried Bernard, bending over her. The marriage was too young yet for him to disregard such pathetic signs as a hand pressed to a brow.

"Terribly, Berr—it is a sudden attack of neuralgia—I think Mrs. Tryke must have brought it on."

"Poor little girl—lean back and rest!"

Honora's head dropped back against his shoulder, and in a furtive, quick way she stroked just where the hair grew thickest above his collar, while her lash-shadowed eyes continually sought the bronze of his ear and of his cheek.

Now she must touch him and look at him as much as possible—she must have her fill of close contact, because soon it would all be over.

To-night and past memories would have to serve for all days to come, so she must make the most of it—the most of it—the most of it!

Honora pressed closer to his side, and as the evening shadows fell she feigned sleep as an excuse for lying undisturbed upon his breast. The last time—the last time!

Presently a clock struck—nine resonant strokes—and Honora felt a movement of the big shoulder against

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which she was lying. Of course he was cramped and stiff.

She rose slowly and stretched, feigning recent sleep.

"Head better, sweetheart?"

"No, dear, it's—it's—worse! Berr—dear—if you don't mind, I think I'll bathe my neck—at the back, you know—with hot water, and go to bed at once. Nothing but a long, sound sleep puts me right when I get these attacks."

She had risen by this time, and was steadying herself against the back of his chair. He put both hands against the sides of her waist.

"Can't I do anything, my poor little girlie?"

"Nothing, Berr, nothing—except, oh, do, do, say once more you love me—say you *really*, really love me!"

He pressed her down on to his knees.

"I don't love you—I adore you! You've remoulded me, you've turned me into a prig, you've transformed me, you've done more to me than any woman has ever yet done to a man. O God, Honora, you've taught me what it is to live!"

She clung to him, she more than responded to his kisses, and when his lips left hers she sought his mouth again.

It was a woman's wild, frantic good-bye to happiness. Honora would go back to where she was before that day in the hush of the woods—go back, yet without the one consolation of being able to look expectantly down that long, white road of What-might-be.

She had looked down the long, white road, and when

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a knight had ridden towards her the strained expectancy left her eyes.

But now she must leave the knight, and never, never again would there be anything to expect.

At last Honora rose and moved away.

"Good-night, Berr—good-night!"

"Good-night, darling—let me know if I can do anything. I shall reckon to find you unwakeably asleep when I come up. Good-night, my Honora!"

"*My Honora!*"

She would like to think that these had been his last words!

Directly Honora reached their bedroom she carried a few of Bernard's immediate necessities across to the room which he used to occupy in the "P.G." days; then she scribbled a little pencilled note:

"Please, dear love, would you mind sleeping in your own room to-night? I believe a sound would wake me, and I must sleep off this frantic headache. Good-night.

Your HONORA."

"Mary!"

The outraged and dignified Mrs. Tryke was crossing the passage, so there was no need for Honora to ring a bell.

"Yes, ma'am?" The response was justly and suitably haughty.

"Please give this note to Mr. Benstead at once, and ask Tryke to have the cart ready by seven to-morrow morning. I—I may want to send some things over to Transley station!"

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A moment later Honora was in her own room, with the key turned in the lock.

So it was over—it was over—it was over!—and Benstead had brought about the end.

Not another hour must they be together, not one poignant moment which might bring about——

Honora covered her face.

What was it he had said?—"that if he thought the crime of leaving an illegitimate son or daughter could be put down to his account, he'd feel inclined to shoot the poor devil, or himself—and that though in such cases the father was bad, the mother was worse, because pity and compassion are to be expected from a woman, and the woman who brings a nameless child into the world has neither."

Yes, that was it, and if they stayed together and their love gave them a child, Bernard would feel inclined to shoot himself, while she would be a woman "without pity or compassion"!

Of course that would be it, because if she—the wife of Stanford Golt—bore a child to Bernard Benstead, that child would be illegitimate!

But it was all Katherine's doing—yes, it *was* all Katherine's doing—because she had reasoned and argued, and wrung from Honora a vow that she had never wanted to give—at least she had wanted to give it—yes, she had, she *had*—and even now perhaps she did not regret, for it is better to live before you die than to die without ever having lived.

And Honora had lived for six perfect weeks in Ber-

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nard's arms; for the future she would always be able to look back and know what life meant—and as thickening, wrinkling, stiffening middle-age creeps on, there is always consolation in being able to look back.

Regret gradually lessens, and the perfect past becomes like a rare and cherished picture hidden behind thick velvet curtains and protected by a locked door.

The daylight world knows nothing of that picture, but when all is silent and lonely, and the good husband has gone to his bridge-club, and the cackling women friends have driven off to parties, an eager hand unlocks that door, pulls back the velvet curtains, and the cherished picture is gazed upon with brightening eyes.

Once upon a time that picture used to be seen through a mist of scalding tears, but as days pass, bringing the eternal future near and nearer, tears are dried and the cherished picture becomes a beacon of hope—for who shall say that the eternal future and the eternal past may not become one endless epoch?

Yes, Honora had lived, loved, and been loved—she must be content—she had "*Vécu son éternité.*"

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CHAPTER XXXII

On the second morning after her second wedding Mrs. Smith-Orlitson sat alone in the dining-room of an exclusive Folkestone hotel.

She was eating an omelet, and the hour was 10.40 A. M.

Some papers, magazines, and opened letters were by her side, and after a hovering waiter had whisked away the empty omelet plate, Katherine re-read one of the letters, laughed, and left the dining-room.

The elevator was in readiness, so she stepped into it, alighted at the first floor, and entered bedroom No. 16.

This was her bedroom, and on the other side of a closed communicating door was the sleeping apartment of her most recent spouse.

Katherine looked at a silver travelling clock on the mantelpiece, jerked one thin shoulder with a gesture of contemptuous impatience, and opened the communicating door.

"Do you *mean* to get up?"

Undisturbed silence.

"*Do* you mean to get up?"

More silence.

Katherine stamped her American shoe, crossed to the bed, and ungently pummelled a large mound which rose beneath the centre of the quilt.

The mound stirred, the mound moaned, then gradu-

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ally a sheet—which had been pulled up over the pillow to keep out the light—was lowered to reveal the towzeled head and unshaved face of Mrs. Smith-Orlitson's second husband.

"Wajjer time?" he mumbled sleepily.

Katherine's reply was to manipulate a fully-charged bay-rum spray.

Tim woke up and cursed amiably—he always managed to do everything amiably.

"Don't play the fool, Kits—I feel so sla-a-a-a-a-a-ack"—here ended the first yawn—"this mor-or-or-or-or-or-or—"—here ended the second yawn—"ning."

Mrs. Smith-Orlitson sat on the end of the bed.

"Is there ever an occasion when you *don't* feel slack?" she enquired acidly.

"Lots of 'em—I never feel slack at meal times, or when there's a good-looking girl to be chased."

"Don't be a fool! Are you going to get up?"

"Yes, I s'pose so—but this early rising craze is a confounded nuisance. What's the time?"

"Nearly eleven."

"Well, it's perfectly absurd—if no one calls me how can I be expected to get up?"

"You were called at 8, at 8.30, at 9, at 9.30, at t——"

"Don't argue, my dear—nothing like argument for taking the youth out of a woman's face. Any *belles-lettres*?"

"Yes, some *lettres*, but I don't think they are specially *belles*. One from Evelyn Chesham."

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"Old cat!"

"Why?"

Tim punched the pillow to make a more convenient indentation for his head, then answered:

"Because she said she hoped I'd do my best to make you happy, as a compensation for your first unsuccessful marriage. She informed me that Mr. Roger Orlitson was a sort of frightful example to husbands, that your life had been a kind of domestic hell, that his death—so far as she could learn—was his only considerate action, and that you had been a brave and gentle wife to one of the world's most complete scamps! That's what your corpulent friend said to *me*, dear!"

"How lovely! How *lovely!*" Mrs. Orlitson was simply choking and squirming with laughter. "Oh, Tim, that's choice—choicer than anything I've heard for a long time!" she gasped, while a little ripple of broken laughs still continued.

"It may be very choice, but I think you'd show better taste not to slang your first and most accommodating spouse!"

"I never did slang him—I only hinted, sighed, and looked patient at him!"

"You red-haired devil!"

"You unshaven loafer!"—after which exchange of compliments Mrs. Smith-Orlitson threw a rolled-up magazine at Mr. Smith-Orlitson's head, who returned the assault by means of a languidly hurled pillow.

Katherine stood up.

"You aren't coming out, then?"

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"I told you I was——"

"Yes, I know you did, but it's past eleven, and I want to get a few fragments of oxygen before everybody else's beastly lungs have consumed it all, so I shall go without you, *mon brave*. Ring the bell for lunch when you want it, won't you?—and tea—and dinner! *Au revoir*, as they say in the Clapham areas—*au revoir*—and *dormez bien!*"

Tim made some remark to the effect that Katherine's German accent was remarkable for its purity, but as Mrs. Orlitson had banged the communicating door these pleasantries missed their mark.

Katherine looked at herself in a long glass.

Yes, the pale mauve linen frock was unique and effective, but the waist *could* be pinned down still farther in the front.

She pinned it. The perfect waist was more perfect than ever, and beneath the short, impudently-cut skirt a very exclusively shod pair of feet might be seen—in fact, they couldn't help being seen, and no one would want to help seeing them.

A hat?—yes, a down-bending burnt straw hat with a daring pair of black and white Mercury wings planted just in the centre and bending backwards.

A veil?—of course, a very ample veil, with a strip of black satin ribbon round the edge.

Gloves?—white. Parasol?—mauve.

A flip of powder under the veil—and the re-wedded widow was ready for her walk.

She passed out of the decorous coolness of the hotel

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into the flamboyant seaside sunshine, and strolled slowly along the Lees.

A great many people looked at her—several women, and most men—but Katherine treated all glances with unheeding hauteur, and concentrated her attention on the fresh air.

It was immensely good to be out here, and Katherine Smith-Orlitson was immensely content.

The recently acquired bridegroom now lying in bed—probably by this time he had dropped off into another beautifully refreshing doze—suited her better than any other; "Grey Rubbers" were still increasing in value, "dear big Berr and Ora" were safely married and happy, so her conscience needn't prick on their account; next season she would be presented on her marriage—Katherine repeated the words "*on her marriage,*" and giggled till a passing blood in grey flannels wondered if he was being tempted—Dr. Sphait was safe; Mrs. Burham was safe; and The Secret was safe.

There was no doubt Katherine had been through squally times, but now it would be all plain sailing in a liner *de luxe.*

Katherine passed through a gap in the wire rails, and sat down on a seat fixed stimulatingly near the edge of the cliff.

The sea was very joyous, even though cheap-trip steamers did mar its white-waved prettiness. Katherine felt momentarily sentimental about the sea till an adjacent band broke into a waltz.

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Katherine listened. It was the "Merry Widow" waltz—and she giggled again.

She wished Tim—and someone—were with her, because a contented frame of mind demands companionship, just as a discontented one requires solitude.

"Katherine! Oh, it *is* you—here you are!"

Mrs. Orlitson turned her red head in astonishment as these words reached her ear and a hand was laid upon her shoulder.

"*Honora!*" she exclaimed with *staccato* breathlessness. "Honora, why are you here yet, and, my dearest girl, why—why are you looking nearly ugly?"

Honora, whose beautifying flush was absent, and whose bewildering eyes seemed unbecomingly out of proportion, bent over the back of the seat.

"I must see you. I want to tell you things—but I can't talk here. Let's go down among those trees," she answered, indicating one of the little fir coppices which decorate the cliffs and prove of such service to Folkestone amorists.

Katherine rose at once, and refrained from asking any questions till they had descended an uncomfortably large quantity of steps and were sheltered among the fir trees.

They both sat down on a wooden bench, on which was carved a romantic diversity of linked initials, and then Honora doggedly fixed her eyes on a white peep of the lower Sandgate Road, which was visible through the trees.

It was evident that she did not mean to look at Kath-

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erine—did not mean to meet those light grey eyes which were so full of magnetism and will-power.

She began speaking at once, and in the definite tones of a woman whose mind is absolutely made up and proof against all argument.

"I have left Bernard."

"Ah! Does he like it?"

"He doesn't know yet. I started before he was up, and left a little note saying I had gone up to town on business. You will explain everything when I'm—I'm quite out of the way."

"Oh, shall I? And what *is* the everything?"

"The everything is my story. When I have gone you must tell Bernard that I am not his wife, but you must tell him, too, how most of it is your fault—how I wanted to be straight, but that you talked, and talked, and talked down my conscience and made me take a vow which I knew was criminal to take."

"Oh, yes. I'll tell him all that. I'll be most self-abasing. But what I should like to know is, why you have suddenly come to this hysterical decision. It's no more criminal to make Berr happy to-day than it was six months ago, is it?"

"Yes, it would be much more criminal now that I know his views on—on"—the flush came back, but it was too vivid for beauty—"on *illegitimate children*." And then briefly Honora repeated the incidents and conversations which had taken place the night before, while every second Mrs. Smith-Orlitson's face grew whiter, less young, and less attractive.

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"And because of this, you—go?" she said after a pause.

"Yes, I go. If we had children, they would be illegitimate and Bernard would——"

"Honora, don't be such a fool, such a *damned* fool. What's the good of making a scandal just because——"

"Katherine—that is absolutely enough!" Honora had risen suddenly, and was standing now in an attitude which was too sincerely impressive to be modern. She might easily have been some avenging dryad—except for the strappings on her white serge skirt and the pink Paris roses in her hat. "Nothing, *nothing* you say will alter me now. You may taunt me about being a coward, but this time my cowardice is bravery—for I am braver in leaving my beloved than I should be in risking all which the future might bring forth! I *will* be brave this once, Katherine. I will not continue this game of mock wifehood—of real bigamy! Bernard shall not suffer the remorse of a nameless child through me! God is going to help me this time, so this time I shan't fail! But you must tell Bernard—and tell him as well as you can——"

Honora had been speaking loudly—in tones that were noisy and emphatic enough to be vulgar, and she paused as an *entourage*, consisting of a well-frocked mother, a well-cloaked nurse, and various well-starched infants trailed through the coppice.

Katherine waited till the last starched child had passed out into the hot sunshine, then she, too, rose from the bench; but for once spontaneity and agility

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were absent from her movements, and the white-powdered face looked grey.

"You so determinedly mean this, and nothing will alter you?" she asked, speaking quite slowly and without any characteristic indistinctness.

"Nothing! *Nothing*—nothing!"

"Then come back to the hotel with me, but don't speak one word on the way—and remember that if I did evil it was that good might come of it! Come!"

And through the fir trees Roger Orlitson's widow led the way.

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CHAPTER XXXIII

When they reached the hotel Katherine, followed by Honora, immediately entered the lift, and was taken to bedroom No. 16, on the first floor.

Katherine looked through the communicating door to find that her husband had actually gone downstairs, after which she turned both keys in both locks, and dragged a flat cabin trunk from under the bed.

Honora watched her in bewilderment.

Why was she getting out the trunk?—why was she producing a bunch of keys?—why was she fitting one into the small patent lock?—what was she searching for inside the trunk, and what connection could anything which might be inside have with this momentous crisis in her own affairs?

"*Ah!*"

This ejaculation, which was half a cry, left Katherine's set teeth and mouth as she produced a small, shabby, mock-leather writing-case.

She rose from her knees and stood facing Honora with the case tightly clasped in her thin ringed fingers.

"It has always been my motto to do evil—certain kinds of evil—that good may come of it," she said, speaking rapidly and indistinctly once more! "Now, for the first time, I am going to do good that good may come of it. I am going to confess—to confess my life's

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dangerous criminal secret for the sake of my brother and for the sake of my friend—for you *are* my friend. Oh, Honora, for God's sake say you are my *friend!*"

It was almost piteous to hear self-reliant, audacious, arrogant Katherine Orlitson begging for a woman's friendship.

"You know I am, my dear—my *dear* Katherine." And as Honora answered she bent forward and kissed a white, cold, powdered cheek.

The kiss was for Bernard's sister, but it was also for a woman chum and companion who had filled so many needs in her empty life.

Katherine clung to her, almost weakly for a moment —then the indomitable pluck of her character reasserted itself, and she was ready for her ordeal—ready to do the best thing she had ever done in all her life.

She opened the little shabby writing-case, took from it a man's handkerchief, a man's visiting card, and an envelope addressed to a man. These she laid in Honora's hand.

"But what are these——" began Honora. Then suddenly she paused, and a vast terror came into her eyes.

The man's handkerchief was marked "Stanford Golt," the visiting card bore the name of "Stanford Golt," the envelope was addressed to "*Stanford Golt*" —the beast whom Honora had married over two years ago!

"What does it mean? How did these come into your possession?" she cried at last.

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"They came into my possession because I found them in Stanford Golt's pocket!" replied Katherine with a return of her usual half-insolent matter-of-courseness.

"Katherine, I don't understand—do—tell me as quickly and clearly as you can—you—you can't think how—how I *want* to know!"

Honora's hands were very tightly clenched together, and she was making an agonising effort not to betray the maddening keenness of her anxiety—because, regretful as the fact may be, human beings are contrary creatures, and almost unconsciously one person will hold news in abeyance if another person shows too ardent a desire for details. Honora knew this, and she knew Katherine.

The restraint worked, and the dramatic situation fell slightly flat.

Katherine Smith-Orlitson began her story.

"Less than eighteen months ago I was suffering acutely from want of funds," she said, setting her voice into an easy, monotonous key. "Roger and I had enjoyed a splendid time—we had gone on spending capital with the sublime carelessness of complete fools, and while travelling abroad we had made well-off acquaintances, who were going to keep us when we returned to town, we did everything we wanted, saw everything we wanted, until quite suddenly the fact faced us that we were beautifully and artistically poor. I couldn't get back on the stage right away, and Roger was afflicted with a constitutional dislike to working in order to

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earn money—so there was nothing for it but to retrench violently till something turned up. Oh, Honora, I can't conceive anything more awful, more deadening, more soul-murdering, more dulling, than retrenchment. Good heavens! A fortnight's retrenchment will kill more of a woman's youth than five years going the pace!"

Katherine paused a second, as though fighting with hideous spectres of recollection—then she continued:

"We took a furnished cottage at Seedlingditch, a desolate, gasless, waterless hovel—ugh! even now I can remember fetching dripping cans of water from an outside tank—a sort of catacomb for women's souls—you know! Roger's clothes were shiny and seamy, my frocks were shabby and bygone; rich acquaintances, made abroad, wrote and invited us for week-ends, obviously expecting return hospitality—and all this while I was washing up greasy dishes and wishing myself dead! Yes, I'd rather have been a red-haired corpse any moment than have gone on retrenching! I would, Honora, I would—I *would!*"

"Yes—perhaps I can understand—go on, dear!" Heavens! why *could* not she get to the point without all this emotional preamble!

"Then one afternoon I found my way out. Roger had gone for a walk, and after finishing such congenial tasks as filling scuttles and scouring sinks, I left the cottage and crossed the fields. The weather was breezy and beautiful, and I was thinking of London, London frocks, London life, when I suddenly saw the brown-

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bearded cheek, the blue serge trouser leg, and the tan boot of a man who was lying on the grass. Of course it must be Roger—laziness had caused him to grow a beard, he wore serge trousers and tan boots, and he was always prepared to undergo the rest cure without any special provocation. I bent over to wake him up, and found——" Katherine couldn't help just one dramatic pause. She could never entirely leave off playing to the gallery.

"Yes—yes——"

"And found that neither was the man asleep nor was he my husband. He was a stranger who bore a somewhat general likeness to Roger, and he was—*dead!*"

"Go on—go on—go *on*, Katherine!" Mad, wild eagerness could no longer be controlled.

"I'm not a nervy woman, so instead of fainting or screaming I turned out the poor creature's pockets in order to find out where he lived and with whom to communicate. But there was nothing much to find—a little money, a watch, a knife, some stamps, *and a handkerchief, a visiting card, and an addressed envelope—the one you are now holding in your hand!*"

There was nothing Honora could say! God, there was nothing, for no human words could frame such a thanksgiving as was in her heart!

She was Bernard's *wife!*—Bernard's *wife!*—Bernard's *wife!* She was free to lie in his arms—to bring forth beautiful sons and daughters with a right to their father's name!

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God—the angels—the saints—the heavens—all, all be thanked!

"Honora, listen, dearie—you'll hear the rest of *my* story? Don't forget *me*."

Honora held out both hands to Katherine, and with warm, quivering, interlinked fingers the rest of the story was told and heard.

"When I found these three things, Ora, a devil whispered suggestions to me. We had only been a week at Seedlingditch—as he spent most of his time in bed, not even the postman or the idiot pedlar had seen Roger—no one knew us—Roger's life had been insured for £2,000—£2,000 would save the present situation, and there was Grandfather Laurence's roulette scheme—this dead man was sufficiently like Roger to satisfy an insurance company. Honora, I put those sole proofs of identification in my pocket, and I decided to run a gigantic risk. If it were possible, I would pretend that *this dead man was my own husband!* Of course the risk was gigantic because it was more than probable that Stanford Golt's relatives would offer rewards and employ detectives to find their missing kinsman. But running risks is a better game than retrenching, so I decided to play it!"

Honora drew a deep breath—one of quite immoral admiration. This red-haired woman was wonderful—wonderful!

"I rushed to the nearest doctor—Dr. Morgan B. Sphait, my dear—and told him my husband was lying dead in a field! Oh, Honora, I acted gorgeously—my

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dazed grief was a dramatic triumph! It was the first time I had ever played lead! But, by Jove, I did it well! He came with me and endorsed the sad truth! My emotions were so upheaved—I must go home to give instructions about the body—I went—I found Roger had returned from his walk—and without a word of explanation I bundled him into a wood shed and kept him out of the way till Stanford Golt was laid upon the bed in a little back room, and until Dr. Sphait had gone back to fetch some soothing medicine for my nerves! Then I hoofed Roger out of the shed, gave him some food in the dining-room, and told him the game that was to be played—how he must go abroad at once and remain away some months, while I permitted him a percentage of the insurance money and profits. But while we were talking it appears the enterprising Morgan returned and looked through the blind—to see me leaning my head against the shoulder of a presumably strange man when my own husband was presumably lying dead upstairs."

"Katherine! Surely that made you afraid to go on with the risk?"

"My dear Kid, I didn't know it at the time. It was only afterwards, when Morgan Sphait discovered the widow had become a rich woman, that he troubled to turn his knowledge into a marketable asset. He did know, later, though—and that's why I've been paying for his Harley Street suite and booming him like mad. But I've got him safe now, and I've got Mrs. Burham safe too."

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"Mrs. Burham! What has she to do with the matter?" interposed Honora, whose personal exhilaration was almost forgotten in wonder at this red-haired woman's marvellous revelations. She was experiencing the fevered eagerness of a person hurried by skimming the pages of an exciting book, so that the astonishing end may be more quickly reached.

"Mrs. Burham saw me at Langley Cross when Roger came back, and he and I were legally and morally week-ending under the name of Mr. and Mrs. Dylke! It was necessary for us to meet so that future plans could be arranged, and I *did* think the Langley Cross Inn would have been safe. But it wasn't, because fate sent Mrs. Burham there on that very identical day, so naturally she thought that the red-haired member of the Serpentine Club was a widow up to larks—whereas she was in reality a decorous wife spending a decorous day to arrange business with her decorous husband! However, Mrs. B. is silent now—the *Worldly Woman* has shut her box-like mouth—though if either she or Sphait *did* split about my presumed lover I don't think anyone would believe them, so it wouldn't matter. It isn't as if they had *any inkling* of the truth, Oro—the truth which could send your red-haired pal to gaol for fraud——"

"Don't Katherine—don't, dear!" And Honora winced because—because this was Bernard's sister!

Ah, yes—Bernard! An idea—an ugly unpalatable idea suggested itself.

"Katherine!"

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"Yes, Mrs. Big-eyes?" Mrs. Smith-Orlitson's *aplomb* was now fully restored, and a keen sense of self-appreciation had returned during the recital of her story.

"Does—does—*Bernard* know?"

"My God, no, of course he doesn't! I'd put myself in the Lethal Chamber if Berr knew—the shame would kill me—if *he* didn't! Berr hasn't always made a hobby of being what one might call a good man, but any stealing, any thieving——! Good heavens, the very idea of Berr knowing makes iced water run up and down my spine!"

Honora heaved a sigh of relief that was almost a hurricane.

Nothing mattered so long as her big husband—yes, *husband—husband*—didn't know and approve of this ingenious fraud.

"Well, now you know, my dear, what do you think of your red-haired sister-in-law? What do you think of her, Mrs. Benstead?"

Honora smiled affectionately and looked her full in the eyes.

"I shall think nothing but nice things of her directly the insurance company—er—— For how much was your husband insured?"

"£2,000."

"Well, directly the insurance company receive an anonymous sum of £3,000 conscience money!—two thousand to pay the debt, and one thousand interest and compensation!"

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Katherine's light grey eyes grew dark with consternation.

"Honora, I can't—I can't——"

"Yes, Katherine, dearest, you *can* and you *will*. I have no doubt about it. I *know* you will. The money will be sent within a week!" And Honora's air of calm assurance was very clever.

"We won't discuss that just now," gasped Katherine at last.

"No, there's no need to discuss it, I *know*, dear—and —oh, *Katherine!*"

Honora sank down on a low chair.

She looked suddenly scared.

"What is the matter?" asked Mrs. Smith-Orlitson not quite amiably. That three thousand notion was absurd—absurd!

"Why, of course—your husband—he is still alive! *What about Tim?*"

"Looks like bigamy, doesn't it, Mrs. Berr?"

"Of course, if—if——"

"But it *isn't*, because, *as I happen to have married my first husband over again*—well, it's only extra legal and moral, isn't it? 'Tim' is just Roger without the beard! Good idea, wasn't it? No one ever saw Roger, so no one can know, and being clean shaven makes such a lot of dif! We shall soon let the Smith slide altogether, so, though he can't be '*Roger*' except in hours of deadly privacy, he'll be '*Orlitson*' till the end. Now you know all about me. I always told you that I was candid, didn't I? Ha! ha! ha! And if ever you split

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to get me sent to gaol, your husband's family reputation will suffer! So I've got you there, Mrs. Long Lashes! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Come along to lunch, then get back to Berr just as slippy as an express will puff you to Sussex! Rog—er—Tim's making breakfast do for his lunch—so come along—come along to food!"

. . . . .

Before the violet summer dusk closed in Honora reached her chicken farm, and half an hour later Bernard had heard the full and complete story of her first verbal marriage—without any details glossed over, except those which merged into the by-ways of Katherine's ingenious past.

"But you don't mind, do you—*do* you?" cried Honora, slipping into his arms.

Bernard was silent a moment, then he answered.

"Certainly, I don't mind in the least—that is, as matters *were* and as matters *are!* Mr. Golt was quite welcome to your scurried legal vows. But if he or any other man had ever held you as I'm holding you now—like *this*—like *this*—I—I think I must have killed him!"

"Of *course* you must dear. But as no man ever has, it's all right, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's all right, Honora—it's all right, my love—my wife—my girl!"

. . . . .

Copy of advertisement appearing a week later in the Agony Column of the *Daily Wire:*

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"*The Excelsior Insurance Company begs to acknowledge anonymous 'conscience money' value* £3,000."

. . . . . .

A copy of "par" in the *Worldly Woman* printed ten months later:

"*Mrs. Smith-Orlitson, who was presented on her marriage by Lady Hespeth, wore 'violette de parme' satin duchesse embroidered in silver with train of mirror velvet lined with silver tissue, etc.*"

. . . . . .

Copy of announcement in the *Times* one year later:

"*To Honora and Bernard Benstead—a son.*"

THE END

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